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CRESCENDO

■

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

HUNGER OF THE SEA
SOUNDING BRASS
PILGRIMS
GREEN WILLOW
MARTHA

ETHEL MANNIN



CRESCENDO

Being the dark Odyssey of Gilbert Stroud



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TO
WILS MELLEN

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

All characters in this book are purely fictitious. If at any point any cap chances to fit, the author is not responsible.

There are many such combined cargo and pleasure-steamer services of the type described in the book, but the author has no particular Company in mind, and although some years ago the author witnessed a shipboard accident similar to that described herein, the particular Company running that particular steamer is in no way described or intended. Such an accident might occur on any cargo-carrying boat.

THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER IN THE ODYSSEY—

GILBERT STROUD	who from childhood regarded women as his natural enemy, and yet who dreamed of acquiring—in the collector's sense—'a rare, exquisite orchid of a woman.'
MARY THANE	who was 'too intelligent to be beautiful.'
LADY ISABEL MERRILL	who would probably have been more intelligent had she been less beautiful.
REX MERRILL	who had 'a wild, young, Shelleyesque beauty,' and was quite incapable of earning his own living.
NICHOLAS STEMWAY	who 'in another age might have inhabited an ascetic's cell, or worn the hair-shirt of a monk.'

AND, LESS IMPORTANTLY—

LORD MERRILL	who took the 'i' out of 'poise,' but was, in his own way, a masterpiece of consistency.
JOHN STROUD	who could forgive a woman anything except lack of sex-appeal.
CARL BERNHARDT	whose sex-appeal 'considerably incommoded' him.
POPPY FERRARS	whose father was a 'canned cantaloupe king,' and whose methods with men were 'collegiate.'
PHILIP RAYMORE	who wore bracelets, collected mosaics, and understudied Destiny.

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PART I
SUBJECTIVE

GENESIS

IN order to appreciate the odyssey quality in the thirty years of life vouchsafed to Gilbert Stroud, it is essential to begin at the beginning. His life began as it ended, with a woman's death.

John Stroud had never intended marrying the girl who, at their first encounter—although it was not her first adventure of its kind—conceived his son. He had intended no more than a youthful summer's night episode. He had not even particularly cared whether he ever saw her again. But Nature, inartistic, inexorable, decreed that what should have been merely a gay, careless adventure of a good-looking, irresponsible young man of twenty-two, and a pretty middle-class girl of eighteen who thought she knew more than she did—or possibly, sex-driven, did not think at all—be not so lightly dismissed. The girl's family would have insisted on marriage even if young Stroud had not been the son of Samuel Stroud, whose control of immense shipping interests made him, people said—exaggeratedly—by way of being a millionaire, and Samuel Stroud being that strictest of all moralists, a reformed rake, saw eye to eye with the girl's family. John Stroud's career at M'Gill was abruptly terminated therefore, and a place found for him in the business associated with the name of Stroud since the days of wind-jammers.

This first matrimonial adventure endured barely eight months. The young wife died in childbirth, and Gilbert Stroud was born of a dead mother.

A year later John Stroud married again, deeming discretion the better part of passion, and the Mount of Montreal being as seductive as ever on summer nights, with the shadowy enticement of its wooded slopes, the stars hanging in its summit's trees, and the sky arched and stretched tent-wise above the great sweep of plain spread out below like a map. It seemed to him as well to choose a wife before inexorable nature betray him a second time into the choice-denying clutches of convention.

Not that he took much trouble over the choice. He was twenty-three and had not the gift of continence. His second wife was a French-Canadian of his own age, and the daughter of a Quebec banker. The thing fulfilled all the requirements of

respectability. Her father was a friend of his father's, and he was formally introduced to her at a dance. They were married within a month. She was a pretty, vivacious, highly-strung girl, with the swift emotional responsiveness of her race. She began her married life in the radiant-bride manner, in the full flush of sensual awakening and satisfaction, and at the end of ten years died worn out physically by a series of futile and too-frequent pregnancies, and mentally by embittering disillusion and regret.

Gilbert was eleven when she died, but in even another ten years of life she could not have added to the ineradicable harm she had already done him, the outward and visible sign of which he carried all his life in the form of a scar upon his right wrist.

In spite of that scar there was actually not an atom of natural cruelty in his young stepmother. She was one of life's victims. Five years of marriage reduced her from a high-spirited, passionate girl to a depressed, neurotic woman, her soul warped and twisted by resentments whose appetites grew with what they fed on until she became both sadist and masochist.

It must be recorded to her everlasting credit that she began by trying to mother her husband's year-old son. She might have succeeded in coming to regard the child as her own if her constant abortiveness had not undermined her nervous system, and, as an integral part of the vicious cycle, she might have been the devoted mother of living children had she been a happy wife; it was the psychotherapy of happiness that she needed, and which, of his innate yet unconscious selfishness, John Stroud was incapable of giving her.

He in turn was the victim of the inherent Stroud over-sexedness, and it was his infidelities, at first furtive, and then gradually growing flagrant with the decline and final collapse of his wife's physical attraction for him, which ultimately defeated her. The scar on Gilbert's hand was the result not of any deliberate cruelty, but of tortured, overstrained nerves. All his life Gilbert remembered the incident, though he never realised the psychology of it.

They were all three of them, his father, his stepmother, and himself, at the dinner-table; he had finished eating and was sitting fidgeting with his spoon and fork, waiting for permission to leave the table. His stepmother, irritably, had ordered him to stop

fidgeting. His father, equally as irritably, had told her to "stop nagging the child."

He had added, "You're always picking at the kid."

The child sensed that his father was on his side, allied with him against this peevish woman who was always issuing commands and frustrating him, and he had gone on fidgeting with the spoon and fork, taking a defiant pleasure in jangling them together and seeing his stepmother wince. He knew just how it felt; he, too, at seven years old, had nervous susceptibilities. He knew that banging doors, dripping taps, a knife or fork scraped across a plate—things like those—could give you a sensation like touching an exposed nerve in a decayed tooth with the tip of your tongue.

He was aware of his father's short malicious chuckle as he continued to make those sounds which he knew to be exasperating.

He had a sudden consciousness of a smouldering hostility latent between his stepmother and his father; knew that his father ranged him on his side against this woman: somehow she was his enemy too. What he could not know was that the tinkling cutlery played upon the raw nerves all over that woman's body, that she felt it in her exhausted, overstrained womb, reaching round to her back, running up her spine, down her arms, tingling in her finger-tips. It was a snapping of the last fine, frayed thread of nervous endurance which caused her to snatch up the nearest thing that came to hand to rap the child's tormenting fingers into stillness. It was pure chance that it happened to be the carving-knife.

The scar Gilbert Stroud carried all his life, not only upon his wrist, but graved upon his soul.

II

TRADITION

I

SHORTLY after this incident, Gilbert was sent away to boarding-school—to be left till called for. It has its significance that one of the first things he did at school was to build a bonfire, tie up a bundle of faggots with a bit of string, fling it into the middle of the fire, and dance round it, shouting gleefully, “Look, there’s a woman in the fire, and she’s burning!”

The matron, to whose ears the news of this piece of childish sadism came, took Gilbert aside and asked him gently—for she was a motherly woman, and without the least vestige of psychological understanding—why he played ‘such dreadful games.’

Gilbert regarded her with cold hostility from excitement-darkened grey eyes, and did not answer. But instinctively, as he stood there, the forefinger of his left hand traced the line of the scar upon his right wrist. There was a nerve that throbbed there, like a little heart, when he was angry, or excited, or defiant, or afraid.

There was the day when the matron was sitting in a patch of sunlight on the school steps overlooking the grounds, a pile of mending in her lap. Gilbert came loitering round the corner and stood leaning against a pillar of the porch, whittling a stick. The matron glanced up and noticed that his grey flannel shirt had a three-cornered tear below the pocket.

She said, “You’ve torn your shirt; I’ve got my needle and cotton here—I’ll mend it for you now, shall I?”

He edged away, his eyes narrowing.

“No, thanks.”

“But why not? While I’ve got the needle and thread all handy—you needn’t take it off, I can do it on you if you stand still.”

“No.” There was something like panic in his voice. “You’d have to come too close to me.” And he darted away.

He had been in a similar panic on his first night at the school when he found that the matron came round the small boys’ dormitory after they were in bed to tuck them up. Some of them she kissed.

He had shouted at her, almost hysterically, as she approached his bed, "Don't you kiss me! Don't you touch me! Go away!"

Some of the other boys had told him, "Mrs. Burleigh's all right; like your Ma; a good sort."

"She's a woman," he said. "I don't want any woman to touch me," and he lay fingering his scar under the bed-clothes. Women were his enemies.

2

His father came to visit him at school, took him riding, spent money on him. He liked his father. He was proud of him. He looked strong. Gilbert thought that when he grew up he would like to look like his father and to be like him, tall, so that you looked over the heads of other people, with great broad shoulders, eyes that were like points of grey light, and a chin that looked as though it had two strong, curved bones in it. He took a great deal of trouble with his teeth-cleaning, because he wanted to have big even white teeth like his father's. His domineering manner with his school-fellows was an unconscious imitation of his father, and consciously he walked with his head thrown back and his shoulders squared.

He did not mind spending the holidays at school; his father visited him and took him out, riding, walking, swimming, rowing. The stepmother was never mentioned between them.

John Stroud laughed when he was informed of his son's almost violent animosity towards women. Laughed and said nothing. The boy was a Stroud; that meant he would be incapable of dispensing with women in his life; but he rather thought that the women who entered Gilbert Stroud's life were going to suffer—the boy would have to get back on women somehow for that knife wound. The idea afforded him a sardonic amusement; he felt that there were one or two things in his own life which justified him in getting back on women. For eight years he had been getting back on his first wife through his second. It amused him to speculate as to the likelihood of his ultimately emulating his father—Gilbert's grandfather—with a sort of spiritual climacteric in the sixties.

Interested him, too, to make other comparisons and speculations.

His mother had died during his first year at M'Gill; his grandmother had predeceased his grandfather by ten years. As far back as he could remember, when he came to think of it, the Stroud women had died before their men-folk. Was the strain of living with the Stroud men too great, then?

They ran to only children, too, the Stroud women. The degeneracy of the Stroud men responsible for that? Something in his brain chuckled cynically. What did it matter? The Stroud men got what they wanted, both in the matter of women and in the matter of money. They enjoyed life, and if their immense vitality and zest for life sapped the strength of their women-folk, what were women anyhow but Nature's tools for the generation of the race? He had no patience with the idealising of women. He saw a long line of Stroud men, going back to the days of wooden ships, and these men reaching out and grabbing a woman here, a woman there, from all parts, to wive with and give them sons; women from anywhere, single scattered units of women, but the long line of Stroud men remaining intact, siring sons, using women for the maintenance of the long unbroken line, and the women dying off like so many female moths that have laid their eggs and, having thus fulfilled their function in life, having no other purpose to make it worth while in the eyes of Nature to keep them alive, but the males living on, splendidly, sending their ever-growing fleets of ships down the St. Lawrence and out of the gulf to the open sea, wooden ships, wind-jammers, ships of iron and steel, steamships, and each generation of Stroud men amassing more money, and marching always in the van of progress long after their women-folk had fulfilled their function and died off. . . .

Samuel Stroud had had his day, his success with ships and women, made his pile; now it was his, John Stroud's turn; presently it would be Gilbert's—Gilbert with the scar on his wrist to remind him that in spite of their softness women can wound. Thank God old Samuel had made him marry when he did, so that his only son was legitimate; it appalled him to think that his second wife, but for that escapade of his youth, might have been his first—she who was worse than barren, who could produce nothing but abortions for the mockery of the Stroud name. Queer how things turn out for the best. He was not sure but that that

scar on the boy's hand wasn't all to the good; later on his Stroud blood must answer the call of women, but he carried upon his wrist a warning. He liked to think that the boy would carry on the Stroud traditions of using women without allowing them to dominate him.

III

BOYHOOD

I

WHEN he was ten Gilbert went to stay during the holidays in the home of a boy called Mark Waller. Mrs. Waller was a slender girlish woman of about twenty-eight. She was, in fact, the prettiest thing Gilbert had ever seen in woman-form. She did not look a bit like anybody's mother. Mark was enormously proud of the fact that she was frequently taken for an older sister. He had explained to his mother before Gilbert came to stay with them, "Gilbert's got a stepmother and doesn't like women, so you don't have to fuss around him."

Mark's mother said, "What a shame!" and wondered what she could do to win Gilbert over. For quite clearly, to her mind, he ought not to be allowed to grow up with his attitude to women poisoned at the fount, as it apparently was. There must be some means of getting rid of the poison. She thought that he must be a very unhappy little boy, and that mother-love and a lot of it would be the solution to the problem. By winning his confidence—wouldn't it be splendid if through her his attitude to women was got into right perspective and his faith in them restored? She felt that she had a mission.

She made several mistakes. By dint of ignoring Gilbert she disposed of his first instinctive hostility towards her, but she was apt to be over-elated with small successes, and tried to rush him from a negative state of non-hostility into a positive state of friendship, instead of working by easy stages, with the result that she was constantly losing to-day the ground she had gained yesterday. But she was the type of woman who does not give in when she feels she has a mission, and she persevered in her blind, kind way.

She came upon both boys in her room one day. Mark was boasting of the richness of his mother's jewellery and showing his friend a diamond and sapphire bracelet, a present from her husband on her last birthday. Gilbert was interested because money interested him, and it was not the beauty of the bracelet which appealed to him, but the vast sum it represented in dollars. He fingered it wonderingly.

"And all these stones are real, huh?"

"I'll say so," Mark answered, proudly.

It was at this point that Mrs. Waller entered.

"I was just showing Gil your bracelet, Ma."

She was conscious of a sense of gratified vanity, and smiled down at Gilbert.

He looked up at her, his eyes keen.

"I guess that's worth a few thousand dollars?" His father always talked in thousands.

She smiled and proceeded to show him other valuables from her jewel case. She was happy that he should evince an interest in her personal possessions; she felt that she was winning him. When she came to lock them all up again she yielded to an impulse and hugged him.

"That's that, Gilbert. Now what else can I show you?"

Gilbert jerked away from her, his face flushing. He said quickly, "No more now. Come on, Mark, let's take our blank cartridges and pistols down to the golf links and scare folks up."

They ran out. Still seated at her dressing-table, Mrs. Waller could hear the swift noisy firings of the toy pistols and Gilbert's wild whoops. She rose and crossed to the window. Gilbert was heading a race in the direction of the links, refilling his pistol as he ran, shooting as rapidly as he could place the cartridges. She found herself wondering, in a sudden flash of insight, how many women he had already shot in his mind—and whether she was among the slain. She was hurt by the sharp recollection of that quick writhe out of her encircling arm. She knew that that false move had completely destroyed what little confidence in her she had spent weeks in building up in his consciousness. Try as she would she could not seem to avoid making a *faux pas* of this sort at some crucial moment. The most she could claim to have done was to reduce the boy's hostility to her to a negative attitude. Her failure grieved her, and she would have been hurt and shocked if anyone had suggested to her that if Gilbert had been ugly she would merely have been impatient over his antagonism to women, and have considered him a very offensive little boy.

But even at ten Gilbert Stroud had what women like Mrs. Waller defined as 'charm', and psychologists, more explicitly, as sex-appeal. Mothers looked at him with the wise eyes of women

to whom the male of all ages is a known quantity, and said to each other that Gilbert Stroud was going to be a very good-looking young man presently. They said this in the curious yearning way in which women with the knowledge that life has already given them all the romance they are going to get, are wont to express themselves, regarding the unspoiled male through the eyes of their sex-smearing consciousness and weary disillusionment. There was, they felt, 'something about' boys like Gilbert Stroud that was irresistible; one could forgive them anything; couldn't help loving them, being drawn to them; there was something rather wistful and appealing about them, so that one could not help yearning over them, these boys who were going to break women's hearts when they grew up. . . .

Thus the sensual romanticism of women closing about Gilbert Stroud even in his childhood.

2

A few days after the jewel-case episode, Mark came in to the room where his mother sat and announced that Gilbert was lying on his bed 'sick.' Mrs. Waller accompanied Mark upstairs, and found Gilbert lying face downwards on his bed. She sat down beside him.

"What is the matter, Gilbert?" Her voice was gentle, caressing. He luxuriated in it. However much he might dislike women, he must have pity lavished on him when he was not well.

"He's been sick to his stummick," Mark explained, helpfully.

"My head aches like anything," Gilbert said, despairingly, rolling his flushed face in the pillow in search of coolness. Mrs. Waller saw that he had been crying.

She put her arms round his shoulders. "Poor old chap. Let's turn the pillow over to the cool side—that's better; now lie quiet, and I'll go and mix you a nice cool draught, then we'll draw the curtains, and if you close your eyes and try to sleep a little you'll soon be better. It's through running about in the sun all day, I guess."

She brushed his hair back from his hot forehead, and he was aware of the caressing coolness of her hands. A woman's hand had never touched him like that before—he did not know whether he

hated it or liked it; it both soothed and provoked, but the coolness was pleasant to his hot aching forehead.

She bent over him and brushed his temples with her lips. It was both unbearable and pleasant, like being tickled in the hollow of your neck. He writhed a little—and smiled.

“Poor old chap,” she crooned over him. “Lie nice and still now and I’ll go get the draught.”

She went out of the room softly with Mark.

“Gilbert doesn’t mind women when he’s sick,” Mark remarked with the sagacity of the very young.

She said gently—almost voluptuously—“He doesn’t really hate women; it’s only that no woman has ever been kind to him yet, and he’s afraid of them.”

“That’s why he hates them, I guess.”

She did not answer, because it was unanswerable. She was quite certain that she had completely won Gilbert over.

Which was not altogether accurate. Gilbert eyed her the next day with the same veiled hostility—but it was the instinctive hostility of the creature on the defensive; he was no longer actively hostile.

By the end of his stay he vaguely liked Mark’s mother, yet for the life of him he could not resist doing the things which he knew she did not like, such as coming to table with dirty hands, leaving doors wide open, and hiding round corners to jump out and startle her when she passed. Something in him made him do these things, and the greater her annoyance or distress the more he would feel impelled to do them. It made the little pulse beat under the scar on his wrist when she frowned and was on the verge of being angry, and something half fear, half excitement, would possess him.

Sometimes in bed at nights he would in his mind enact scenes in which he exasperated her until he made her cry, and in those scenes when she cried he went up to her and put his arms round her as she had put hers round him when he had been sick, but always at this point she would look up, and it was not her at all, but his stepmother who looked at him with her maddened, tortured eyes, and then he would roll over, burying his face in the pillow to shut out the vision, and his scar would ache and throb as violently as though the wound were newly done. . . .

3

A year later he was allowed to go home for the holidays. His stepmother was dead and buried, and John Stroud was finished with marriage, if not with women. With commendable discretion he chose housekeepers who were both plain and elderly, and therefore, for him, unsexed, and they were assisted by bedraggled women who came daily and whom he never saw.

Gilbert's next few years were lived in an exclusively male world in which his father was the predominating figure. At school his high spirits and an instinct for leadership made him popular with the boys, and an easy, careless brilliance gave him popularity with the masters. Without effort, and without wanting them very much, he carried off prizes that other boys coveted and 'swotted' for. He despised 'swotters,' and it amused him to get what he wanted without wanting it very much.

During holidays he went riding and swimming with his father, and continued, both consciously and unconsciously, to model himself on him; and as there were apparently no women in his father's life, it seemed to him entirely right and proper that there should be none, not only in his present life, but in his future life. His future seemed all very simple and straightforward when he thought about it, which was not often. He supposed that he would go to M'Gill in due course, as his father had done, and then graduate into the business, and always he and his father would go riding and swimming together, canoeing on the lakes in summer, ski-ing and tobogganning on the Mount in winter, and there would always be that comfortable, tacit understanding and affection and admiration between them, obviating any embarrassing necessity to talk or explain themselves to each other.

Life, as Gilbert Stroud saw it at that time, was delightfully simple and satisfactory. Nor did his adolescent discovery of secret elements within himself in any way complicate his singleness of outlook. It meant only that one had a queer, exciting, rather shameful, hidden life, but fundamentally it did not make any difference to one.

He went to the university at sixteen, as his father had done; but at an age when John Stroud's mind had seethed with women,

his son was reading Schopenhauer and Strindberg on women with a malicious delight, and walking arm in arm with young men who also inclined to the misogynist view of woman—which had also in it, paradoxically, much of the Stroud point of view—and forming terrific lifelong friendships which always expired with the vacation.

YOUNG MANHOOD

AT twenty, Gilbert Stroud entered his father's business, in accordance with the Stroud tradition. A few months later a political conflagration in Central Europe flamed, slowly at first, then with an incredible, unstemmable fury, into a world-war.

Gilbert Stroud enlisted in an amused spirit of adventure, and with a sense of it being anyhow the obvious thing to do. He wished it hadn't occurred in the middle of the summer-camping season like that, and hoped it would all be over so that he could get back to Montreal in time for the winter sports.

Before he was twenty-one he had a commission in the Canadian forces and been drafted 'overseas.' The war meant a trip to Europe, anyhow. It was a kind of college militia service, but with more guts to it. Being in training at Folkestone was like being in a super-cadet corps. He scarcely had time to be bored, for he arrived in France with the Second Division in 1915. Things became rather less like a super-cadet corps. He was wounded at St. Eloi and again at Courcellette. And yet again at the Arras-Cambrai advance of 1918—but this time it was the Germans who collected him.

Now of all those crowded nightmare years of his war experiences, one thing only he remembered vividly to the end of his life, and that was the time he spent lying on his back beside the shell-hole in No Man's Land between the recovery of consciousness and his being collected by Saxon stretcher-bearers.

He lay there and remembered . . . going over the top with his men in a grey morning twilight; no sensation then save an almost overpowering desire to sleep, to creep into a hole and sleep and sleep, like a mole in the earth, and part of this sensation the torturing consciousness of the necessity for staying awake, that and an exhausting sense of relentlessness . . . the long file of men creeping forward through that grey light, to be caught almost immediately by machine-gun fire, and swift on the heels of that the German artillery opening out and men going down like mown corn, fastastically, mown down until there was no more rhythmically moving file. He had seen it happen many times before, yet each time it gave him that sense of amazement, and in the

midst of that bewildered horror came that swift, stabbing, sudden darkness. . . .

When he opened his eyes he was lying on his back beside a shell-hole, and it was daylight, with a pale, disheartened sun filtering through low, heavy clouds, and a burr of aeroplanes overhead—British 'planes—and a distant boom of artillery from the English lines, and his first thought the ironic idea that having survived the attack he might yet be disposed of equally swiftly by English 'planes or the fire from his own lines.

He raised himself a little and saw a wide plain littered with brown humps, but only for a moment, because an agonising pain flamed through his legs as he raised himself, and he sank back with a groan and darkness engulfed him again. When it cleared he became aware of rifle shots cracking through the air, and lifted his head. Prussians walking about between the humps, a few wounded, terrified horses going down before the Prussian rifles; stretcher-bearers, grey figures bending over the brown, but they were not coming in his direction. Faintness from excessive loss of blood overpowered him again, and when next he opened his eyes the plain was empty of any sign of life.

He turned his head from side to side, and one of the humps came to life, was dragging over to him, crawling between other humps. Gilbert watched it, fascinated, and presently it was close to him, a blood-soaked, tattered thing that a few hours before had been a man that had stood upright and had had a face; it was gibbering at him now, trying to say something; only the eyes were human in that monstrous travesty of a face. It was trying to say something, and presently Gilbert understood.

"Shall we make a run for it?"

He said wearily, "Don't be a fool," and the thing collapsed near him and lay still.

Gilbert continued to lie on his back and look at the sky, and as he lay there it seemed to him that his mind thawed, and a dull resentment burned in him like a smouldering fire. He remembered things that seemed long and long ago.

The exhilaration with which one 'joined up.' The excitement of going overseas. England for the first time. O.T.C. days at Folkestone—the cross-country runs and the pub where they sold

such wonderful beer, or it seemed wonderful after that run across the low green and white English cliffs. Running, riding, swimming—things you needed your legs for, and it was in the legs they'd got him, curse them. . . . He who loved all those things was lying here, wounded for the third time in this disgusting, insane business . . . waiting, what for? Was he to lie here till one of our own shells got him? Or until he was taken prisoner—or probably dispatched by a German who did not consider him worth the trouble of carrying away?

A fragment of a marching song trickled through his brain:

“ I came away in a canvas trough,
And I got two Fritzes to carry me off,
When the Kaiser gave the party.”

And after that—inactivity for the rest of this interminable war. Something writhed in his mind at the thought of it. Nearly four years had dragged by—the war might go on for ever. Had there ever been a time when there wasn't all this chaos of guns and carnage? Fantastically remote and unreal, like a dream, were the days when he had swum the St. Lawrence, known the joy of an Arab pony between his knees, tasted the cold sweet air of freedom. . . . A pulse throbbed in his head, “ I've had enough of it. I've had enough of it.”

Presently, if the artillery from the British lines didn't get him first, the Germans would be along, and if they thought him worth the taking there would be the horror of the Red Cross train, for the third time, only this time a German version of it, and some converted church hospital . . . and amputations without anaesthetics . . . something fainted in him with the surge of memories of that last base hospital. . . . What was the good of waiting—for that? Better to put an end to it; no one could say he hadn't done his bit. . . . He groped at his belt for his revolver. Why not? What else? If he didn't dispatch himself someone else would—and make an obscene mess of it, as they'd made of that poor devil with half his face shot away, and yet who clung ludicrously to life and gibbered at him to make a run for it. . . . Well, he would make a run for it—but through eternity. There they were again, stretcher-bearers in the German field-grey that

looked blue against all this other dun; coming this way they were now . . . going to collect him in his turn, if the death that spun about them everywhere in the air didn't get them and him first; collect him and take him, Gilbert Stroud, to some prison-camp, shut him up there without even the freedom to fight, for years, perhaps. . . . By God, no! He dragged his revolver out of his belt and lifted it. It felt incredibly heavy, and the effort exhausted him.

Ice-cold it was when he laid it against his temple . . . like the hands of that kid Mark Weller's mother stroking him when he was sick. . . . Funny, remembering that. . . . Wonder what happened to Mark. He felt sore about never getting through to the University. He remembered him in the volunteer reserve, chest stuck out, ridiculously proud of his uniform. Did you get into this mess, too, old chap? Not so proud of being in uniform now, eh? . . . Well, here was one who had had enough of the Kaiser's party, anyhow. . . . One had but to pull the trigger and be out of this bloody war for good. . . .

He raised himself on one elbow, dark waves rushing over him dizzily with the effort; he lowered the revolver out of sheer weakness. Damn the thing! How heavy it was! What was the matter with it? He looked at it—and suddenly a savage anger swept over him, and he pitched the thing into the water at the bottom of the shell-hole.

He wouldn't die; he was damned if he would; they'd plugged him three times and he was still alive; took a lot of killing off did the Strouds; he'd live through this war and come out on the other side, and then, by God, life should make up to him for all this; so long as there was breath in his body he was not defeated, and one of these days, by the living God, he would ride and swim and row and run again. . . . He collapsed, sweating, blood pouring from the wound that his movement had reopened.

He was semi-conscious by the time the two Saxons with the stretcher reached him. He heard the thick guttural murmur of their voices, felt their hands wandering over his body.

"Done them out of the revolver, anyhow," he thought—and then with regret remembered the gold cigarette-case in his tunic pocket. He heard their exclamations of delight as they found it

and flicked it open; they took the last few remaining cigarettes—and, surprisingly, put the case back in his pocket. The shock of his surprise caused him to open his eyes and look at them through the mist that swam before his gaze.

They smiled at him, genially, lighting his cigarettes, and one of them whipped a bent cigarette out of his tunic pocket and offered it to him.

Mechanically Gilbert said, "Thanks," and the cigarette was placed between his lips and lit from the same match. With a curious, detached cynicism he thought, "The third man off the match. . . ."

The cigarette proved to be filled with something that was not tobacco, and he could not smoke it, and spat it out. The Germans laughed, sympathetically, and proceeded to lift him on to the stretcher, which caused him such excruciating pain that he shouted out. They exchanged a few guttural remarks, then one of them bent over him and proceeded to dress his wound roughly, to stay the bleeding, and by the time they had lifted the stretcher and marched off with him Gilbert Stroud was unconscious.

The odyssey of Gilbert Stroud properly begins on that day when there was presented to him so vividly the choice between life and death, and he chose life. There was to come a time when he would remember, with bitterness, that once he had had the choice.

POST-WAR

I

GILBERT STROUD emerged from the world-war with a slight limp, raw nerves, and his views on women somewhat rearranged. There had been an adventure at Folkestone of no particular importance in spite of its being his initiation—of no importance because it had not been of his seeking. He had found himself dragged into it with a party of young officers determined to have a 'spree' before going 'out there.' He had been, if not actually drunk at the time, at least not fully responsible for his actions. He never knew her name, and by the time he had been a week in France could not rightly remember anything about her except that she had an irritating giggle and a mole on her right breast. She had been a typist in a Government department, her morals, like those of her friends involved in the party, swamped by war-time hysteria.

At the base hospital after being wounded at St. Eloi he met a baronet's daughter who was driving a lorry. She was by way of being a nymphomaniac, and she collected him and treasured his memory as the rarest of her war-time collection. He remembered that her name was Barbara, that she was slim and narrow-hipped and red-haired, and that he had found her a little shocking because she treated him very much as he had treated Mrs. Waller in his youth—that is to say, there was a distinctly sadistic streak in her which he had not expected to encounter in womankind, and which disconcerted him. But there had been about her, too, an imperiousness which had appealed to something in himself—she, too, wanted power, refused to surrender her personality, contrived to stand a little apart, and a little cynically at that, from her body's lusts. For that he could respect her; because of it he remembered her.

And there had been a plump German matron in Hamburg after the Armistice, who had shared her bed with him for the sake of a meal, a placid, docile creature upon whom, subconsciously, he had revenged himself for Barbara. In England, too, awaiting demobilization, one of those farewell parties, and the inevitable pretty ladies scared up at the last moment from God-knows-where

—a Maida Vale flat, rose-shaded lights, and a five-pound note left on the dressing-table, because the war was over, and one was no longer carried away by sentimental emotions. . . .

One might write racy chapters, complete stories, on all these episodes in the life of Gilbert Stroud, but to what purpose? They were not important; they meant no more to him than the fact that he was mentioned in despatches. They were war-time incidents; fundamentally they did nothing to him; through them he learned that the female element in life could not be overlooked, but they merely rearranged, without basically altering, his attitude to the sex. At twenty-five the soft glances of women still caused him to draw back into himself like a snail into its shell; women must still not come too close to him: they were to be taken in small doses as required, not taken into one's life and swallowed in big draughts. Any hint of possessiveness in a woman's voice infuriated him all his life—was sufficient to send him writhing out of her arms. He was the possessor; he refused to be possessed; the very thought of any woman prefixing his name with the possessive pronoun was sufficient to set a nerve throbbing under the scar on his wrist. Woman was made for man, not man for woman.

2

The war left him restless. He did not know what he wanted. He was in a curious negative state of mind in which nothing much mattered or was worth the effort. He had lost his simple zest in life. The Stroud organisation which had always seemed so romantic and splendid when he was an undergraduate, had dwindled for him into a mere business concern, and its interests failed to absorb him. He had a vague idea that he wanted to do something big, something which would place the reins of power in his hands, but he did not know what he wanted to do, or what manner of power it was that he wanted, or for what purpose he wanted it. He perceived that his father was not the hero he had seemed to his boyhood's imagination—his pre-war imagination—he was merely a successful business man who made philandering his hobby. He saw him now as selfish, sensual, vain, and, because of these things, rather stupid. Montreal, which had always seemed

to him rather a fine and swaggering sort of city, had somehow shrunk into a little provincial town.

With the idea of getting back on life for all that it had done to him during the last few years, to wipe out the memory of trenches and dug-outs, mud and blood, Red Cross trains and base hospitals, the German prison-camp and indescribable things, he plunged into a whirl of social activity. There were a great many parties given in the yellow Stroud house among its trees at the foot of the Mount, and he was in return invited to a good many parties. He danced and drank, and kissed a great many women—whom he failed to recognise the next day when he passed them on the street. He despised them because of the readiness with which they came to his arms—like so many homing pigeons, he would think cynically, and the complacency with which they stayed there until he turned them out. They were too easy. In the eyes of every woman he met he sought the woman who would make possession worth while because of the difficulty of the capture; only such a woman could ever mean anything to him—she who had the imperiousness of Barbara of the mud-splashed khaki without her inherent promiscuousness.

He would think bitterly, "If my features didn't happen to be arranged as they are, and if I was one of those blighters who fought like hell without getting mentioned in dispatches, they wouldn't look at me." He despised them, the whole lot of them—and was perfectly aware that they found his contempt, and the bold insolence of his manner, enormously attractive. Resented them, too, because they had a sort of power over him that was not to be denied.

So far as he could see, what the post-war young woman wanted was a cross between a sheik, Mephisto, and a *matinée* idol hero. And they weren't honest, as men were, wouldn't admit to simple animal impulses and appetites; they had to tie them up in the pink ribbons of sentiment and label them 'love.' He remembered things he had seen at *cafés* and *estaminets* in France; things which got into the newspapers in respectable England and were hotly denied, but which nevertheless existed. It had sickened him at the time. But now he could think—why not? From a prostitute one at least got a square deal; you knew where you were with her; there was no Mamma hovering anxiously in the background

with ultimate marriage in view; none of that terrible, suffocating, 'you-are-mine-aren't-you?' questioning in eyes and in the clinging of hands.

He was moved to make investigations. He liked to motor into Quebec at week-ends; the surrounding country appealed to him, it was so wide and open and candid; and there was the peculiar enchantment of the steep old narrow streets with the French names. Below the escarpment upon which the château perches, near the waterside, in that dark, sinister No Man's Land where at nights, it seems, anything may happen, and where strange Apache-like figures lurk in dark alley-ways, and street lamps thrust out from sweating walls and diffuse dim, unhallowed haloes like something in an opium-eater's dream, there was one such street, and, amongst a huddle of old houses, linked by the steaming yellow panes of saloon and café windows, a frowning, austere house completely dark save for the red lamp which burned outside.

It afforded Gilbert a sardonic amusement. Outside it was sinister to the point of melodrama, yet within, as prosaic as a shop; you paid your money and you took your choice. Was it for this dreariness and spuriousness that men flocked to those cafés and estaminets in France as relaxation from unspeakable things? The shame was not that at the sign of the red light they should seek forgetfulness and diversion, but that the red light had so little to offer those denuded moths fluttering about its flame. Savage revulsions of feeling would sweep Gilbert Stroud when he thought of it. What a game it was, the whole sickening, suffocating business! As futile as the hand-squeezings and lip-offerings of excited virgins at a local dance. . . .

John Stroud regarded his son shrewdly. What was the matter with the boy? He wasn't pulling his weight in the business; he was moody and irritable and disinterested. He developed the habit of motoring out to the lakes, putting up at hotels, and turning up the next day, or several days later. Well, of course, John Stroud reflected, after the war the boy wanted some relaxation; life had a lot to make up to him; he must have his fling; he had no desire to tie him down, but it was not as though he seemed to be enjoying life. He tried to get at him, to find out, in his own language, what bug it was that was biting him.

The boy would answer irritably, "Oh, it's the war, I guess. Out there we were always talking about what a hell of a good time we were all going to have when it was all over; but now that it is all over—what is there to do?"

His father answered drily, "You seem to be having a pretty good time—if the amount of money you're running through is anything to go by."

Gilbert flamed out at that. "Dollars! You can't buy happiness with money! I'm sick to death of all the so-called good times you buy with dollars!"

"Green-sickness," John Stroud commented curtly. "You'd better get a mistress—or a wife. Neither would cost me any more than your present mode of living."

"Women!" He almost spat out the word. The pulse under his scar throbbed furiously. "A man goes through four years of hell-on-earth, and comes out whole on the other side, and you offer him—women!"

It was John Stroud's turn to lose his temper. "Well, what the devil is it you *do* want? You're not doing any dam' good in the business—you're spending money—*my* money—like water! You're no good to yourself or anyone else. What is it you want? Another war? That at least kept you occupied!"

Gilbert stormed out and slammed the door. He was not seen in Montreal for a week, and when he came back he was sullen and apathetic; only his eyes held that tortured, seeking look.

And John Stroud, sitting in his swivel chair in his office, looking out over the St. Lawrence, a cigar between his lips, would think a great deal about his son. He understood him rather better than Gilbert gave him credit for. He was, in fact, a much more intelligent human being than this post-war Gilbert gave him credit for. He knew that the art of satisfactory living lay in understanding life without attempting to explain it.

He thought: The boy's a Stroud; it's natural he should fool about with women at his age, but that business of Grace and the carving-knife has given a twist to what ought to have been normal enough; it's not the war at all, or not wholly; the bug that's biting him is his relation to women—he needs them, because he's a Stroud, but he's up against them because of Grace—blast her! The war

only added to the trouble. Take a boy straight from school and shove him into uniform before he's had time to look round and adjust himself to life; first his stepmother gives him something to remember all his life, and then he's plunged into that bloody mess; and when he's done killing and being pretty near killed himself, these fools of women spoil him, and he hasn't any philosophy to help him along—never had a chance to develop any. He wants to be happy and he doesn't know how to set about it, because he doesn't know what he means by happiness. He ought to be back at school carrying on where he left off. He needs to knock about the world a bit—a peace-time world. Travel—seeing Europe; it's the thing to do nowadays; a year of it, a couple of years if need be; he'll still be only a youngster then, and he's never had a chance yet. . . . A post-graduate course at Oxford, perhaps, a look at Paris, the Sorbonne, perhaps. . . . Got to get in the international touch these days, with the geography of the world all rearranged. . . . New York? No! No good to him; it's not coherent; hasn't got a cohesive point of view; just a screaming howling mess. Europe first. After that we can see. Get him married off to a daughter of one of the English *nouveau riche*, perhaps, and with her father's money develop the idea of a combined cargo and passenger service, cruises to southern seas, and a cargo both ways. . . . Offices in London and Liverpool, and the boy as managing director. . . .”

He would sit rocking to and fro in his swing-chair, his dreams going up like the thin blue smoke of his cigar, whilst Gilbert was tearing out of the city in his sports model two-seater, trying to get away from himself, gripping the steering-wheel as though through it he could get a hold on life itself.

In the summer of 1919 Gilbert Stroud, at the age of twenty-five, set out for Europe, and there began that dark odyssey to which all the rest had been in the nature of a prelude.

PART II
OBJECTIVE

ENCOUNTER

IT afforded Gilbert Stroud a sardonic amusement to compare this his second crossing to Europe with his first. The troopship in which he had gone 'overseas' in 1914, and this slick 'ocean greyhound.' He played quoits and deck-tennis for hours at a stretch until his hands were blistered; in the ship's gymnasium he voluntarily did the physical jerks that had been so tedious in his cadet days; he danced all night and every night, choosing his partners with an insolent discrimination from the great number of girl students who were 'going over' for the first time with the first of such parties since the war. Those who were up to his own standard of dancing he danced with night after night; those who were not, he never danced with more than the first try-out dance; those whom he retained he philandered with, mildly. Night after night there was some girl to take into the bows of the ship, and he would delight in the way in which her high-heeled shoes made it hard-going for her on the grubby, rope-littered lower deck. More than one girl ruined an evening dress for his sake clambering up and down greasy ladders and negotiating coils of tarry ropes; more than one caught cold shivering in the wind-smitten bows, and faced the risk of pneumonia, not to mention sea-sickness, for the sake of that Stroud boy who was 'such a terrific good-looker.' . . .

And Gilbert, looking at the great body of the ship swinging behind them, rearing its lights to the stars like some fantastic galleon, dipping and swaying across a black unseen sea, would be caught by the strange dark beauty of the thing, the poetry of ships that was inherent in the blood of the Stroud men droning and singing and crooning for him in the rigging, with that queer sound of bells that is part of the music of all ships, great and small; and he would turn from the wonder and strange loveliness of it—to see in the dim light some pretty doll face with soft adoring eyes, and the waste of the thing would consume him with a sense of futility, great tides of bitterness and despair wash over him. He did not want those pretty doll-women; they meant nothing; and he would either make some curt remark about it being 'too cold for you here', and stalk back to the promenade deck and the commonplace

sanities that were not touched with the wild mysteries of beauty, or take his companion into his arms and kiss her with a despairing bitterness that he knew she would mistake for passion. Which was a kind of passion, but not in the sense that she would understand it, since it had nothing to do with pulchritude and was not aphrodisiac, but a frantic flinging of his spirit all-whirl into the bosom of a girl. . . .

Until the last night, and the lights of Cherbourg glimmering through the lambency of dusk. "Lights on the water, lights on the shore, and the white stars aquiver." Gilbert shivered; beauty so often wasn't bearable; it did something to one. Blue-green veils of twilight swathed him in melancholy. . . . Of such a quality were the nights that gathered down by the waterside under the château at Quebec, nights bruised by the red light; red lights here, too, harbour lights, red lights and green, like eternal verities, danger and safety, hazard and security. . . .

Excitement and confusion of disembarking passengers; the tender alongside; in the stern of the tender someone strumming a banjo, singing a smoking-room song to an intermittent accompaniment of women's voices and laughter.

"I'm not the iceman,
Nor the iceman's son,
But I'll fill your ice-box
Till the iceman comes."

Interminable song, leading onwards always to the Rabelaisian climax that never comes, the asymptote of the world's repertoire of smoking-room and marching songs and the sea-chanties that are never made into nice little collections for the delectation of the bourgeoisie.

"I'm not the milkman,
Nor the milkman's son."

The life and soul of the ship being the life and soul to the end, until the tender pulled out and was lost in the dimness. . . .

Cherbourg in the twilight, and the tender leaving . . . lights receding astern.

Gilbert turned away from the rail. Yellow squares of light that were the smoke-room windows . . . steaming like the saloon windows in the shadow of the Frontenac. . . .

There was a sound of singing; that meant a champagne party . . . someone celebrating the winning of the day's sweep, perhaps . . . a sing-song.

“For to-night we'll merry, merry be,
And to-morrow we'll be sober.”

The British and American spirit of carnival, self-consciously hearty.

Gilbert stepped into the lounge. He was not in the mood for the smoke-room to-night—he knew what it would be, air thick with cigar smoke, a fudge that hit you in the face as you entered, engulfed and smothered you—but he wanted a drink; something harsh and bitter and stinging that should purge the brain of beauty's cobwebs, and poetry, and the nameless sadness of old, remembered, far-off things whose phantoms rode hard upon the dusk. . . . All the frightful, frightening unappeased and unappeasable restlessness and ache of the world. . . .

The smoke-room door was blocked by a woman passenger in altercation with a steward. He was explaining with the apologetic asperity of his kind in such situations that the smoke-room was barred to ladies.

She seemed bewildered. Insisted, “But I've been invited to a party here.”

And the steward, inexorable as Fate, “Not in the smoke-room, madam. This is reserved for gentlemen only. There's the general smoking-room on the next deck.” He indicated the elevator, and turning, she saw Gilbert Stroud.

That is to say, she saw two eyes like points of light, and was aware of a male presence.

He saw dark straight hair smoothly parted on either side a high forehead, confused dark eyes, straight nose, mobile unpainted mouth, a gleam of bare shoulder where the fur cloak over a gold evening dress slipped away. Not beautiful, no; her face was too intelligent for beauty in the accepted sense, he decided in that

brief moment of impression; but attractive, yes, expressive—definitely interesting—refreshingly interesting; alive.

He smiled. "If you were looking for Mr. Rutherford's party——"

"I was." She, too, smiled. He liked her teeth, white and even as his own.

"And now you are not?"

She flushed slightly, confusedly. "Yes, of course."

"That is a pity. I'll show you; it's in the upper smoke-room." There was the faintest hesitation on his part whilst he took in, swiftly, the shape of the hands that held the fur cloak about her, long hands, sensitive, ringless, pink oval nails, and the small, firm curve of her breast under the gold sheath of her dress where the cloak revealed it, and then he added, "That is—if you really want to go."

Her eyelids should have fluttered under this boldness, her breath known a sharp intake, according to all the recognised rules of the game; but she merely looked at him steadily from eyes that might conceivably be warm, but now were cold.

"Of course I want to go."

He permitted himself that faintly insolent smile that most women found quite irresistible in its provocativeness.

"It would be more amusing if we made an adventure together to the bows of the ship. It is a very beautiful night, and there is nothing beautiful in a smoking-room."

She raised fine curved eyebrows. "Really?"

"No, romantically. To-morrow we reach Southampton." His voice was sombre.

Her mouth twitched into a smile, and with her amusement gold specks came into her eyes, like lanterns carried suddenly into a dark room.

"Why is it," he demanded, in the imperious Stroud manner, "why is it that you and I have been a week on this ship and never set eyes on each other until this moment?"

"There are over four hundred first-class passengers," she reminded him, and her expression was droll in its suggestion of suppressed laughter.

"But there is only one of you and me."

At which she laughed outright.

"Your name isn't Valentino by any chance? Supposing you take me to that upper smoke-room we were discussing?"

He laughed. "I surrender. You are not collegiate, and because of that it was probably ordained before either of us was born that when at last we met one of us must always be going somewhere else. I have always suspected Fate of having a perverted sense of humour."

He conducted her to the upper smoking-room and found her party for her.

"Won't you," he said, "come and talk to me on deck afterwards? You'll be in need of fresh air."

She stood regarding him with her head tilted back and that air of suppressed amusement.

"I shouldn't think it at all likely. Thank you for showing me the way. Good night."

He bowed and said deliberately, "Au revoir."

He heard the low vibration of her laugh as he turned away. It lay there at the back of his mind, a curiously pleasant irritant.

THINKING OF WOMEN

I

GILBERT STROUD made his adventure to the bows of the ship alone that night. For the first time during the voyage he was really interested. Who was she, this woman who mocked him with amused eyes? This woman who stood level with him, and that not in stature alone, and in the process reached out and fastened tentacles in his imagination? He no longer wanted that harsh, bitter drink to wash the webs of fantasy from his mind; he wanted this woman at his side, and her voice laid like music on the cold night wind that swept the hidden sea and drew a singing of bells out of the ship's rigging. For the first time in his life he wanted to talk to a woman—one of the contemptible sex.

He leaned his arms on the gunwales; somewhere ahead, a few hours ahead, lay England—England for the second time, with the khaki smears wiped away; he was going back after five years a free man. He had flatly refused that post-graduate course at Oxford which his father had suggested to him; there was no going back in that sense. He would go to Oxford to look at it from the outside, dispassionately. He wondered whether this post-war Oxford had anything in common with the pre-war M'Gill. Did the men walk about like the men of his time at M'Gill in stupendous consciousness of the segregation of the sexes? Superbly secure in a sort of terrific spiritual homosexuality? Did the youngsters still walk about arm in arm discussing the Schopenhauerian view of women? But no, of course, that was pre-war. The war stretched like a great gulf between yesterday and to-day. It was as well to remember that. Schopenhauer would be as dead as free-love and daring to be oneself, as dead as Queen Victoria and John Ruskin. What then? Socialism? No, William Morris was dead, too; even before the war his Utopian ethics were obsolete, and Fabianism, too, was become a little old-fashioned. Communism they called the new sociology, didn't they? Communism there would be, and the new decadence, and psycho-analysis, and the League of Nations; the Russian revolution; and the new democracy—whatever that might mean. He would find M'Gill all over again in the Oxford quadrangles

and cafés, but a post-war edition, and he the post-war edition of himself. . . .

He laughed aloud and turned his back on the sea and the England beyond. God, how beautiful a thing a ship was! Beautiful at any time, but seen from the bows at night, dark hulk swaying against a lesser darkness, a thing to catch the breath. . . . She should be there to share that beauty with him; she would not make obvious remarks, or expect him to make love to her. It was preposterous that her intelligence and candour and essential sanity should be squandered on a smoking-room party. . . .

He made his way back to the deserted promenade deck. Laughing and singing still came from the smoke-room.

“She was pore, but she was honest,
Till on the scene the rich man kyme.”

He dropped down into a deck-chair and waited, but something told him that she would not come. Her pride would not let her, and—he faced the fact—it was highly probable that she was not in the least interested in him.

2

The lights in the smoking-room went out at last; a few men in evening dress, and two couples, straggled out on to the deck. Gilbert turned up his coat-collar so that they should not recognise him and speak. There was only one person in that ship with whom he was in the mood to hold conversation, and it was for her he waited—a thin persistent thread of hope fighting the innate knowledge that she would not come.

The couples disappeared into unlighted corners, climbed to the boat-deck; the men stood awhile at the rail smoking and talking, cigars in evidence, shirt fronts gleaming, their talk pierced with short barbs of laughter. Presently they made their nightly promenade of the deck, striding briskly, conscientiously exercising, and at last they turned in. On a ship, Gilbert reflected, listening to their good-nights, one always ‘turned in.’ Shipboard life was an interminably long-drawn-out cliché—signifying nothing, exhausting in its emptiness and futility and inanity. One even made love in clichés; not from any lust of living, but out of sheer boredom; like taking the trouble to find out who had won the

sweep on the day's run—not because one really cared, but because it was something to do. The cold night air began to eat into his bones, and he rose and went in, through the empty, lighted swaying lounges, creaking gently with the roll of the ship. There was the discreet night steward standing like a policeman on point duty; at the bottom of the staircase, facing the entrance to the dining saloon, two stewards sat silently polishing hundreds of pairs of first-class shoes ranged about them in a semicircle. They glanced up disinterestedly as he swayed past them, clutching the mahogany banisters. They sat flanked by hydrangeas and palms that quivered with the vibration of the ship's plunging steel heart. Gilbert saw them suddenly as figures from the phantasmagoria of a dream—lost souls condemned to a purgatory in which their punishment was the cleaning of a never-ending circle of the shoes of mortals. He passed them with a muttered 'Good night,' to which they responded cheerfully and humanly enough, and staggered down the hot narrow corridor to his state-room.

He thought, sitting on his bed and unlacing his shoes, thank God they'd taken those dropping red roses away, anyhow. A great box of them had come on board at Quebec, whence they had arrived by train from Montreal. The card enclosed had said, "Bon voyage, and love from Betty." He still couldn't recall who Betty was. There were still a few red petals lying on the strip of carpet, but his kicked-off shoes concealed them. There was that about coming into a new port—one flung overboard the excrescences forced upon one at the previous port. England lay ahead with the daybreak, England and a new chapter . . . a post-war chapter. . .

He proceeded to undress. Another rose petal on the dressing-chest. Betty—yes, of course; he had danced with her the night before he had sailed; blue eyes and fair hair elaborately waved; Colonel Ingham's daughter; danced divinely, but preferred to sit out; the sort of woman who made love a sport like an orgy of shooting tame pigeons. Coyness masking a savage sensuality, but saved from destruction by an equally fierce instinct of self-preservation, lacking the courage of her passions.

Pah! These young girls with waved hair and rolled stockings, man-hunters disguised as pretty dolls; first Poppa pays all the bills, and then with the aid of Poppa's money transmuted into clothes,

perfumes, powders, permanent waves, and passages to Europe, they acquire a man of their own, and from then onwards it is not Poppa but Hubby who foots the bills, but the man-hunting goes on. Kept; all along the line. . . . The women who had been out there and worn khaki, driven lorries, scrubbed hospital floors, bandaged men's broken bodies, stood by at amputations, done a thousand nameless horrible things—why didn't they rise up in a mighty regiment and rid the earth of this pestilence of pretty kept doll-women? They talked about the emancipation of women, but there were these post-war youngsters to whom the war had meant nothing save a supply of officers for their amusement—too young to appreciate the significance of a world war, yet old enough to suck a sort of excitement out of it. That was the ultimate definition of post-war, wasn't it, under age so far as the realism of war went, exonerated by their youth from the responsibilities of it, or any vital part in it, yet old enough to utilise the advantages, of the relaxation of discipline and the revision—or nihilation, which was it?—of the moral code? Being post-war gave you the right to be flippant about it, stand outside the emotional chaos of it; a blaze of hysterical Armistice celebrations, and that was that; get on with the next thing. . . . It made no difference to these youngsters that thousands of men had died. Died? By God, not just died, squandered their lives in the most monstrous folly since the world began! What did they make of it, he wondered, those legions of the dead, in some unknown, unregarded Valhalla?

His mind seethed with resentments just below the surface of consciousness; the two great wrongs that life had inflicted on him were interlocked, fused, deep down in the stratas of subconsciousness; the wrongs that women do to a man, and the wrongs of war that seize a man and use him and fling him aside—like refuse cast out from a mammoth machine that catches up into its maws that which it needs, uses it, and ejects the waste for which it has no further use.

"The wrong of uncomely things is a wrong too great to be told." Only if the consciousness of it was there at all, it was like a poison from which the spirit never freed itself. When your stomach was sick when you were a kid they told you that you would do well to be sick; "You'll feel better when it's up," they'd tell you, and you

did; but when you grew up and your soul was sick there was no such remedy, though your spirit retched until it was exhausted. . . . Oh, well! He switched out the light and pitched into bed.

He closed his eyes, as an intimation to sleep that it might claim him, but his mind tossed wakefully. She would understand, that woman with the amused, candid eyes; and the face too intelligent for the sort of beauty that the world understands. She who lay like a curiously pleasant irritant at the back of his mind. He could talk to her about women, too, this monstrous regiment of women. Talk to her with a brutal honesty, as to a man. A woman had to have a masculine mind before one could talk to her; lacking that they exuded womanliness all over you, played up their cursed sex attraction till either you mentally strangled them—or drowned in that morass of femininity. It was that monstrous regiment of womanly women who were responsible for the extraordinary glorification of ordinary physical desire, the obscene dressing-up of ordinary animal instincts in the shoddy rags of romance, labelling it, grandiloquently, 'love.'

Romance! The sensualist's last refuge! Love! A woman's crowning dishonesty!

An impudent imp darted about in his mind, crouching in odd corners and disturbing the discarded lumber of the dead things that had lived yesterday. The baronet's daughter of St. Eloi—what was she doing now? In post-war London, perhaps, running a ménage with the accent on the men. The imp stuck out its tongue. Better a cynical sensualist than a sentimental one—like those placid, bovine matrons who carried their marriage lines in their faces and whose minds were spiritual doublebeds—feather-beds, soft, smothering. And the money the men they acquired spent on them, weighing them down with jewellery and furs as the Sabines weighed down Tarpeia the betrayer with their shields. What satisfaction did they get out of it?

Gilbert Stroud tossed feverishly upon the hard mattress. The imp in his mind kept prodding him awake. Women who swallowed men whole, body and soul. . . . 'They play sex as Americans play golf. . . .' By God, yes! But it needn't be so, something in him snapped out suddenly at the darting imp. That woman with the honest eyes—she wouldn't. And there must be others.

He could conceive of a woman who would be a credit to a man. An exquisite orchid of a woman as beautiful as her pearls, as flawless as her diamonds, and whom a man might prize as one prized some rare and priceless jewel. Such a woman would be an achievement in a man's life. Love? What had love to do with it? Nor worship, nor adoration, nor desire, nor any sentimental thing. The mere possession of such a woman, at the head of one's table, the jewel set exquisitely in the crown of one's life, would be enough. Such a woman needs must be achieved dispassionately. . . .

He knew now what he wanted, what he sought, as some men seek power, money, prestige—that supremely exquisite orchid of a woman of whom men should whisper as she swept past at his side, “Gilbert Stroud's wife,” something tantamount to awe mingled with the envy in their voices.

His thoughts raced. Proud she would be, and cold, and arrogant, in order that his possession of her might have about it the flavour of a conquest and a triumph. So proud and cold and arrogant; but he would own her, body and soul, and in that ownership get even at last with the wrong too great to be told, the wrongs that women do roaming the world of men and seeking whom they may devour. . . .

The scar on his wrist throbbed so violently that he sat up and switched on the light and sat there gripping his wrist, whilst the imp in his mind darted to and fro, unravelling the fabric of his consciousness, dragging it back down the years, until he was a boy again dancing round a school bonfire, and shouting, “Look, there's a woman in it, and she's burning. . . .”

There was a fire in his mind now, and amid the flame a woman, but the flames were his possessive passion, not any carnal passion, but a relentless passion of the will. . . . And now he saw her clearly, small proud golden head tilted back so arrogantly, poised upon the lovely slender throat like a flower upon its stem, and the red angry scar upon his wrist would be cooled against that white throat that was his equally to caress or bruise. . . .

He stumbled out of bed and opened the porthole. The sea was a shimmering pond, and there was a light creeping like an incoming tide over the sky. Coming to England again—England of the mortgaged stately homes and the impecunious peers, to pluck an English orchid that had its roots in history. . . .

What would John Stroud have to say to that? John Stroud who had buried two women, and both of them nonentities, and one of them barren? But he, Gilbert Stroud, would carry on the long line of Stroud men, and that magnificently. He, too, would make money, but not as the Stroud men had made it for generations, for the lust of power, the ever-growing fleet of ships sailing out over the seven seas of the world, the ever-broadening commercial enterprise. He would amass money in order to achieve a different sort of dream, such as no Stroud had ever dreamed before, one that should put the dreams of all the other Stroud men in the shade; he would ally the name of Stroud with one of the oldest families in England, from whence the original Stroud stock was drawn, and infuse a new pride into the degenerating Stroud blood. . . .

It might take years. What of that? He was young, and great things are not quickly accomplished, and another twenty years would only find him in his prime; and twenty years was not too long for the finding of perfection. There was, too, he was convinced of it, such a thing as the magnetism of desire; to want a thing intensely enough was to work towards it inevitably, because all one's conscious and subconscious actions were then like weeds drawn in the flow of the compelling tide of that desire—subconsciously every impulse and action piled up towards the objective, became a means to an end, and one's life became a crescendo of endeavour and pursuit culminating in the superb, inevitable achievement. . . .

The scar ceased to throb. Quietness invaded his spirit as the light invaded the sky. To-morrow, he thought, the to-morrow that was already to-day, since dawn's signal was in the sky, he would talk about all this that surged within him to that woman with the amused intelligent eyes. She would be interested because all this that whirled within him was the very stuff of life, and something in her eyes suggested responsiveness to life. And he must tell her, too, because she had to do with all this; queerly through her had come the realisation of what it was he wanted in life.

His mind, exhausted by the surging spate of ideas that his brief contact with her had set in action, held her image for a moment, then snapped out the vision as his hand snapped out the light, and in unison with his body turned over and went to sleep.

III

TALKING OF WOMEN

I

A FEW hours later he saw her again on his way to the saloon for the passport inspection.

He said, "I waited for you a long time last night."

She smiled. "That was foolish. I made no promise."

"No. But I wanted to talk to you."

"One of the hardest things in life is to do what one wants to do."

"I'll look for you on the train—if you're going to London?"

"I am—but one can't talk on trains."

"Perhaps not. But one can get acquainted."

He passed on into the saloon. He had the conviction that at least she would not deliberately evade him.

In the crowd and chaos of disembarking at Southampton he lost sight of her. After he had secured a seat on the train he made a tour of its entire length, causing a good deal of annoyance to passengers standing in the corridors; but he could not find her, and once the train had started the ordeal of repeating the tour along those swaying, luggage-encumbered coaches was more than he was prepared to suffer for any woman. There was still the thought that he might see her at Waterloo.

He came upon her by chance, one of the human flies swarming round the dubious honey-pot of the luggage van.

He touched her arm. "Can I help you?"

"Thank you—but this looks like mine being flung out now. You can get me a taxi, if you like."

He did. He observed that her baggage was marked M. Thane.

He said, "I hope your name isn't Maggie and that there's no uncomfortable Mrs. prefix."

She retorted, "And I hope yours isn't Bertie and that you don't wear bow ties."

"It isn't, and I don't. Allow me to present you with my card."

She took the card from him. "It's a nice name," she approved, "and I like colonials."

He groaned. "We don't all ride about the great open spaces

where men are men, you know, and quite a lot of Canada isn't prairie and doesn't read Robert Service. Really, Maggie——"

"It's Mary. Mary Thane. But that won't convey anything to you."

"Ought it to?"

"Not being a member of the great British reading public, perhaps not."

"You write? I'm sorry about that. So many people write nowadays, don't they? I'm afraid it will be novels, too."

"I'm afraid so. I ought to add also that the unpleasant prefix to which you referred is applicable to me, but not Thane—it's not my married name. I don't use it any more. I never did—much. This taxi is steadily ticking up."

"It's a way taxis have. Will you dine with me to-night?"

"Yes, please. I'm a great believer in free meals for the deserving poor."

"Where would you like to dine?"

"Somewhere terribly chic and expensive."

"You will remember that I am an ignorant colonial backwoodsman. May I call for you, and then you can personally conduct me to your pet dive. Where do you live? Chelsea, I suppose?"

"Very nearly." She gave him an address in Sloane Square.

"And you?"

He mentioned the Grand Babylon, at which, with the typical Stroud gesture, he had booked a suite.

She said, "I am terribly impressed. How long are you going to be in London?"

"I don't know; a week or two. I want to go and have a look at post-war Oxford before I proceed with a seeing-Europe programme. What time am I to call for you this evening, and what do I wear?"

"Eight o'clock, and a white tie. We'll have a drink at my place first, and dine about eight-thirty. Good-bye for now."

She climbed into the taxi and smiled at him, a frank friendly smile that lit her eyes.

He removed his hat and answered her smile.

"Au revoir—Mary!"

2

Promptly at eight o'clock Gilbert Stroud presented himself at Mary Thane's flat, which looked out on to the almost Dutch stateliness of Sloane Square, leafy with summer. Alighting from the taxi, his eye had caught the gleam of roses, and he had an impulse to buy a dozen. It occurred to him as the lift bore him up to the third floor, upon which, according to the varnished board in the hall, Mary Thane had her flat, that it was the first time in his life he had bought flowers, or indeed any gift at all, for a woman. He supposed that if he told her that, for all her intelligence, she would not be clever enough to believe him. But perhaps it would be a sign of unintelligence on her part if she did—like believing a man who says 'you are the only woman I ever loved.' Yet he himself had never said 'I love you' to any woman, nor asked her if she loved him. Even his impulse to buy those roses had been curiously detached and unsentimental; he knew that if he had not chanced to see them he would not have sought about for a florist's. He wondered if she would be clever enough not to misinterpret his impulse—if she understood the subtle art of accepting the gesture of an impulse without insisting on a motive.

She opened the door to him herself—a blue door with an enormous gargoyle knocker and a clipped yew in a blue tub, like a sentinel, standing beside it. He approved instantly the straight simple line of her black dress—approved it as a whole, irrespective of detail; he suspected that it was free of detail; he knew instinctively that it was 'right.'

She said, smiling, "Punctual person," and stood aside for him to enter the tiny hall.

There was a dark oak refectory table upon which stood a glass bowl of roses. He said, laying his hat there, "I'm glad you like roses, because I bought you some. *Voilà!*"

She took them from him. "Thank you. That was nice of you."

He was glad she did not gush, or bury her face in them.

"It was rather," he agreed, and followed her into the sitting-room.

It was a bigger room than he had expected after the tiny hall. He had an impression of primrose walls, dark furniture, silky Chinese rugs, touches of blue, pale net falling in long soft straight

lines from high windows, delphinium spikes in bold relief against light backgrounds, an attractive carved Venetian fireplace flanked by bookshelves. His eye penetrated beyond the first swift general impression and took in details, approved the Dutch etching above the mantelpiece, the good reproduction of the Dancing Faun of Pompeii below. He liked the painted wooden kangaroo at the other end of the mantelpiece—it was absurd and unwarranted, like the odd things that came into one's mind at unexpected moments. He approved the mind that could find it not incongruous exactly where it was. . . .

She watched him absorbing the atmosphere and texture of the room.

"Well?" Her eyes were laughing.

He started. "I beg your pardon! But it's a compliment to your room, really. It is charming."

She answered simply, "It is rather nice. Won't you mix yourself a drink whilst I put these roses in water?" She indicated a side table. "I think you'll find all you want. There's gin, Italian, French, Angostura—and ice. I won't be a moment."

"What is your particular poison?"

"Oh, just a gin-and-it. Not too much gin." She went out with the roses, and returning, seated herself at one end of the low couch under the window and regarded him. "Bring the drinks over here and sit down." She reached out and drew a small orange table up to the couch. He set the drinks he had mixed down on it and seated himself.

She raised her glass, looked at him, smiling, "God-bless-me."

He responded, "Me, too! But there are better toasts."

"Not at this stage."

"No? Where am I to take you?"

She named the then most chic and exclusive club. "I'm a member, and I thought it might amuse you. The food is good, and you will see attractive women."

"But where does your part of the entertainment come in?"

"I shall see personalities—and watch your reactions. Have a cigarette." She helped herself to one from a curious little silver and wood box on the table and pushed the box over to him, carelessly, in the modern manner.

She glanced up at him for a moment as he bent forward to light her cigarette, and then asked, with the first spiral of smoke, "Tell me, why were you so anxious to know me? After I'd refused to philander with you on the promenade deck."

He reproached her. "I suggested a much more romantic place—the bows of the ship."

"Does the location make so much difference? I always thought the net result was the same. But you haven't answered my question—and motives interest me."

"I'm sorry about that. I dislike motives intensely myself. I am all for unquestioning acceptance, taking life as it comes and no questions asked, and all that sort of thing. But I'm glad you decided not to come and be kissed in the bows of the ship, because if you had I shouldn't be sitting here with you now, and this is much more interesting."

She gave him a droll look. "Is it? Have another gin-and-whatever-it-is and tell me more."

"I think you should tell me something about yourself. What were you doing in America, and why did you sail from Quebec?"

"Must one have a reason for going to America? I thought, it was just one of the things everyone did eventually. I went to get it over, shall we say. I was tired of being asked, 'What did you think of the States?' and having to admit I hadn't been, so I went. And then after the little domestic upheaval I wanted a change of atmosphere."

"There was a divorce?"

"Yes. By request."

"But the Canadian part?"

"I wanted to see Quebec chiefly. Do you like Quebec?"

Quebec! The steep narrow streets going down to the water-side, secret, sinister; the red light. . . . A wave of old complex resentments, angers, humiliations swept him. A nerve twitched under the scar on his wrist and he pressed his hand to it. He felt suddenly nervy and restless, and rose abruptly.

"Don't let's talk Quebec. Let's go."

He stood waiting, still gripping his wrist. She looked at him curiously, then rose and crossed over to him.

"What is it?" She unfastened his fingers from his wrist and looked at the scar a moment, then pressed her own fingers to it.

"You must tell me sometime," she said.

"Why should I?" Old submerged hostilities crept up in him.

"Because if we are to be friends I must know a little about you. I know probably more than you guess already."

"What do you know about me?" He moved away from her.

"You've met all the wrong women—and it has something to do with your neurosis."

"Why do you say I have a neurosis?" He was interested in spite of his resentment. No woman, anyhow, had said anything as interesting as that before.

She pressed out the end of her cigarette in an ash-tray. "That isn't very difficult—one has only to look at your eyes—the movements of your hands——"

He answered irritably, "Well, don't psycho-analyse me now, anyhow. Let's go."

"I'll get my cloak. Don't be angry." She smiled at him, and there was again the light touch of her fingers.

"I'm not—but mention of Quebec suddenly set a train of thought—emotions—in action—the association of ideas and all that——" He laughed, suddenly self-conscious, tried to explain. "The moment I get a little nervy this dam' scar starts to throb, and that makes me more nervy—a sort of vicious circle. Don't let's talk about it. Let us go quickly and drink buckets of champagne."

They went out together into the little hall.

"You can 'phone up for a taxi," she told him from her bedroom door, and gave him the number of the nearest rank.

When she rejoined him she was wrapped in a Spanish shawl, and wore three of his roses on her dress. She was not beautiful, yet what was it? He did not know. But he was aware of the harmony of black silk, red roses and white skin. He liked the fineness of her eyebrows, the smoothness of her hair, the droll expression that crept into her eyes when she was amused, and the soft darkness when she was moved; there was something quiet about her, and sane, and honest; she had poise and self-possession—and a capacity for unexpected tenderness.

His hand on the front door, he turned back to her suddenly.

"Before we go——" he said. He slipped the other hand under her chin, and turning up her face, kissed the soft unpainted lips.

"Sweet thing!"

For a moment her head rested against his shoulder.

"Nice person," she said.

3

During dinner Gilbert announced suddenly, "You know, Mary, to-night is a sort of initiation for me. I've done two things for the first time—bought a woman flowers and kissed a woman cold-bloodedly."

"What on earth do you mean by cold-bloodedly? As you might kiss a maiden aunt?"

"I shouldn't kiss an aunt, maiden or otherwise. But since you force me to be crude—I mean as opposed to hot-bloodedly. Dispassionately—because I felt drawn towards her mentally, not because of any driving physical desire."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "You know, Gilbert Stroud, I can't make up my mind about you—whether you really like women or not. You've stared at every pretty woman in the place—her face, her clothes, her figure, her legs, until it's a wonder some maddened male escort hasn't flung you out, and yet you always talk about women with a sort of contemptuous surprise at yourself. Do you like them—or what?"

"Or what, I should think. No, but seriously, Mary, what is there for a man to like about a woman?"

"Oh, I don't know. Most men seem to find there's everything to like."

"You mean all this love business? But can't you see it for the fake it is? Food is necessary to one, one can't get along without it, but one doesn't pretend, therefore, that one loves every slice of cold mutton with which one makes one's body intimate—and when you come to think of it, eating is a much more intimate affair than love-making."

"Your metaphors are what a reviewer said of one of my books, 'far from nice,' but do go on."

"I mean—women are as necessary to men as food, but because it's not considered quite nice to put it like that, we camouflage the whole business and drag in love! It is profoundly humiliating

to a man's self-respect to have to admit that the female of the species is so persistently necessary. Men are physically polygamous and mentally misogynist."

"You've been reading Strindberg," she accused him.

"Not since I was an undergraduate. I've been through a hell of a lot since then."

"I daresay—but you're still rather undergraduate all the same. Your whole attitude is wrong—out of focus. I'll admit there's not much love in the world, and that most of the stuff we deceive ourselves is the authentic article is ninety per cent sheer unadulterated sex and the rest equally unadulterated sentimentality, but sometimes the lovely incredible thing happens."

"Don't talk like a lady novelist, there's a good girl. I persist that the thing we call love is merely a preference on the part of each individual's private sex-selection committee."

"And I persist that whatever you've been through it's left you terribly young. How old are you?"

"Please, ma'am, eight next birthday. What does it matter? We are as old as our experiences—years have nothing to do with it."

"How old according to experience, then?"

"Old enough to be your lover before I'm another night older. Let's dance."

The place was as full of women as a garden full of flowers in summer. Exquisite, well-groomed, well-bred women, slender golden reeds of women. There was a woman in gold brocade. He remarked on her to Mary when they returned to their table.

"That is a beautiful woman. I adore fair women—and a woman should be like that, thoroughbred as a racehorse, and as slender. I never want to own a racehorse, but one day I hope to own a woman like that." He glanced at her again. "But she doesn't carry her shoulders well—so many English women don't—American women are better for that, and our French-Canadians better than both. A woman should have narrow straight shoulders, lean hips, small hands, slim ankles—she needs to be of pedigree stock to fulfil the specification—like a thoroughbred horse—and then the breeding comes out in every line."

"Gilbert, you're abominable!"

"Is it abominable to be specific?"

"It's abominable to talk about owning a woman as you would a racehorse. Silly, too. Nobody ever owns anybody; people's souls—thank God—are untouchable! If you could make the sort of woman you want love you, you might own her then—it's just possible; the miracle does sometimes happen, as I told you; if she loved you enough she could give all of herself to you; but not otherwise; and it doesn't often happen; few people love enough; they usually hold back something, some hidden, secret part of themselves. Women especially, I think."

"But women love very easily, don't they? And a woman will give a good deal of herself when a matter of about a million dollars is involved, don't you think? But don't look so disgusted—let's dance again."

It amused and interested him, that hot-house of exotic flowers of women. He had no doubt that some of them, as Mary said, were distinguished in English society, but he wanted none of them; nowhere was she who was the quintessence of exquisite, immaculate perfection; their knights and baronets and peers were welcome to them; for him, Gilbert Stroud, of the long line of Stroud men, nothing less than perfection would do; he wanted more than a pretty face or an attractive figure, and he was heartily sick of sex-appeal—he felt that on that Atlantic crossing he had encountered enough feminine sex-appeal to last him a lifetime; she who was to carry on that line of Stroud men must be beautiful as a pearl and brilliant as a diamond. He might never find such perfection—but nothing less would do.

He and Mary left at midnight. Arrived at Sloane Square, Gilbert said, "Am I to keep the taxi and return to my hotel, or are you going to ask me into your charming flat again? I warn you that if you do I shall undoubtedly make love to you."

Mary said, looking down ruefully at her crushed roses, "I have already gathered that. But aren't you rather rushing matters?"

"Life is short, isn't it? And time purely relative. You will never know me better or like me more than you do now."

"That is probably true." Her tone suggested that she debated the matter with herself. He waited, and suddenly she laughed.

"Send the taxi away," she said.

IV

LIAISON

I

THERE was this dialogue between those two in the grey hours of that morning.

"You are awfully—decent, Mary. You don't humbug. Let us dine and sleep together every night until I go to Oxford."

"I appreciate the compliment, but I may have a private life of my own."

"Women with such peace-giving capacities as you have no right to any private lives. Don't you realise that you are one of those rare women who were expressly designed by Nature to save mankind from becoming completely cynical? I'm not sure but that your kind oughtn't, for the general good of society, to be made public property and Government subsidised."

"I'm all for the Government subsidy part of the programme, anyhow."

"And you're so adorably honest about things."

"You're honest, too, Gilbert; you love—Latinly."

"Bless you! But wouldn't you prefer to be made love to? Wouldn't you at least like the illusion of it being a love-affair, instead of just an affair?"

"A love-affair doesn't stand much chance of growing into a friendship; an affair at least stands a sporting chance; having nothing to lose, there's room for gain, as it were. I'd sooner have a man say 'I like you,' and sincerely mean it, than say 'I love you' for the sake of romance."

"But if he said 'I love you,' and meant it?"

"I should be afraid to believe him. With men one never knows, does one? And when one does, one can't be certain."

"Adorable thing! Where shall we lunch to-day?"

"Is it to-day already? I can't lunch with you to-day, I've got work to do."

"Must you work? Where shall we dine, then?"

2

It was this way with them for a fortnight. By day Gilbert moved about London getting the post-war flavour of it, and every

evening the cocktail hour found him at the little flat overlooking Sloane Square. They dined out every night. Mary called it laughingly Thane's Organised Seeing-London-by-Night Tours. Usually they would dine at one or other of the little intimate 'Chez' this-that-or-the-other places which were becoming the vogue, go on to a theatre, and then to a cabaret or the night club to which they had gone on their first night. Mary wanted to take him to parties, but he refused; he had had enough parties in Montreal; he preferred to be an onlooker, and parties involved one as participator so that one couldn't see the wood for the trees. Mary, on the other hand, knew all the interesting places in London, and he had the money to buy what they had to offer in the way of amusement and interest. It was both amusing and interesting to sit back in a corner and watch the motley of duchesses, débutantes and divorcees, peers, parasites and paramours, the new rich and the new poor, that made up the variegated pattern of the fabric of this post-war London life in which money could buy you anything from a drink after hours to a coat of arms.

Gilbert had letters of introduction to various business connections of his father's in London, but he did not use them. His days were a futile idleness, and he knew it. He was marking time, and he knew it. There were moments when he resented the intrusion of Mary Thane into his life; but for her he would not be marking time here in London; he would be looking at Oxford; savouring Paris; moving about the rearranged Europe. But some quality in his association with her held him, curiously. All day he would look forward to the evening that would bring him to her—the coming into her cool light room with its books and flowers and atmosphere of the-world-shut-out, the friendliness of her welcoming smile, her quiet, listening face when he talked, the simple candour of her responsiveness to those impulses which she defined as 'Latin.' She did not irritate him as other women did; she did not ask him if he loved her, or create little dramatic scenes; she was unaffected; too honest to be sentimental; too sincere to be cynical. She satisfied some profound, almost subconscious, need in him—the need of someone with whom one need never pretend. He tried to explain it to her once.

She said, "I know what you mean. One can find a friend or

a lover very easily, but the friend is the harder to come by, and hardest of all the person who is both. It is one of the most fundamental reasons why marriage so frequently fails as a satisfactory human institution—the ‘good pal’ marriages fail because there’s something missing, some flame-like quality; the passionate marriages fail because passion entails jealousy—and jealousy destroys all possibility of confidences. Husbands and wives dare not confide their most real worries and problems to each other—so they struggle along with deception until they come a cropper. There’s no mental intimacy—and therefore no realisation that physical fidelity is the least important form of fidelity—that mental and spiritual fidelity is infinitely more important! Oh, I’m so bored with all this marital insistence on physical fidelity—this disgusting vice of sex jealousy! If one cannot be mentally faithful to any person intimately in one’s life, what is the value of mere physical faithfulness? And if one is mentally and spiritually faithful, what on earth does it matter what one’s body does? Yet people go on year after year breaking each other’s heart, wrecking their homes, spoiling their children’s lives for the sake of this physical fidelity fetish! If the sanctity of marriage means anything at all, surely the first thing it means is sorting out first and last things and getting them into proper perspective. A little more sanity and a little less sentiment would make it a more satisfactory proposition.”

“Your marriage?” Gilbert asked. “What happened?”

“Nothing in the least sensational or dramatic. It was simply one of those quite common cases of the woman of twenty-five not being the same person as the girl of eighteen. One doesn’t—unless one is a case of arrested development—think or feel or react the same at twenty-five as at eighteen on any matter—certainly not on sex matters. In women, particularly, I suppose, those seven years form about the most vital period of her evolution. My husband was already thirty when I married him—and when a man reaches thirty he doesn’t change much afterwards, not fundamentally, anyhow. The thing became impossible, obviously. He was one of those fidelity fanatics. His jealousy amounted to a mania—the usual disease induced by the unnatural state of monogamy. As time wore on and we drifted—inevitably—it became a perse-

cution. An obscene and disgusting and monstrous persecution! In every line that I wrote, in every association that I formed, he sought for signs of my physical unfaithfulness. His mania even extended to my women friends. That I had been mentally and spiritually unfaithful to him for years never seemed to occur to him—it never does, to that type. The thing became utterly impossible. If there had been any children I suppose I would have shaped some sort of philosophy and struggled on—like a lot of other women—I'd have had to, I suppose—at any rate for a good many years longer than I did. But there was no such tie, thank God, and I left him three years ago, after seven years of it. He sued me for that quaint thing called 'restitution of conjugal rights.' I refused to return—and finally he divorced me. It's the insistence on 'rights' that wrecks marriages. This devastating possessiveness men and women drag into their relationships with each other. As though anybody can ever hope to hold the sole copyright in anyone else!"

"And yet," Gilbert insisted, "it's the only thing that is ever going to hold the institution of marriage together. It seems to me it's a question of the survival of the fittest. One of the parties has to be top dog. It's a matter of one's personal pride, too."

"Pride," she flung at him passionately, "it's all most people care about! Their silly little personal pride! And they talk about love! What has pride got to do with love? If you love a person your pride counts for nothing—you don't care for anything in life except the other person's happiness. It's utterly altruistic. There's nothing fine or noble in being so—one can't help it. It's what love does to one—strips one stark to all the winds of the world! If you really love a person there quite simply isn't anything in the world you wouldn't do for that person—from going to the utmost ends of the earth to staying out of his or her life for ever! The trouble is that when most people talk about love they mean self-love. People who love each other don't insult and hurt each other; they don't make demands; they can't. Love is utterly selfless—that's why there's so little of it, so tragically little of it, in life. Human nature isn't big enough for it—it's in human nature to guard its silly little pride, and make demands, and establish

'rights.' It's a mass of uncontrolled sex instincts and egotism. Most people make me quite sick when they talk about love."

Gilbert smiled. "Including novelists?"

"Novelists especially! Ninety per cent of our novelists, particularly contemporary novelists, ought to be locked up for the immoral dissemination of shoddy ideals and ready-made ideas. No wonder marriage is the shaky institution it is to-day! Look at all the anti-marriage propaganda issued at seven-and-six a time! It's not all the faithless husbands and wives of fiction that put ideas into the heads of the great marrying and married public, but the disgusting amount of unreasonable suffering attributed to their funny little lapses. It's not cynicism that does the harm—there's a tonic quality about cynicism taken in moderate doses—but all this luscious sensual sentimentality issued in the name of romance and drama. A cynic never hurts anyone except perhaps himself, and he is at least amusing, but your sentimentalist does incalculable harm—it's the sentimentalist who is most ruthlessly sensual, and keeps alive the revolting legend of the importance of physical faithfulness and personal pride. Here endeth the second lesson. I feel that I am about to spawn an article for the Sunday Press. For the love of Mike let's have a drink before I become really subversive!"

Gilbert was amused, but though he liked Mary's vigorous unsentimentality, he violently disagreed concerning the doctrine of possession being pernicious. He knew that there was within himself an almost savage sense of possessiveness, and that if he ever found the woman who fulfilled his almost impossibly fastidious standards of perfection, he would probably be as tormented by jealousy as the man who owns a priceless jewel or work of art is tormented by fear of theft or destruction.

But he endorsed with something of Mary's own passion her attitude discriminating between the sensuality of the sentimentalist and the cynic. Affectionately sensual matrons were as impossible in his estimation as frigid virgins, or those disapproving matrons who resign themselves dutifully to man's brute nature. There was the spurious purity of convention, and the flame-like purity of pride. There was the nauseating sensuality of force-of-habit-and-association conjugal intimacies, and the virile sensuality of

elemental impulses uncomplicated by any confusing mental processes. It was typical of the muddled sense of values of mass thought—or was it lacking of thinking?—that the nice difference between the sensuous and the sensual should be so frequently confused. There was so little appreciation of the finer shades, so little sense of life and living. There was so much colossal stupidity in the world that one resorted to cynicism not as a sneer at life, but as a bright clean blade of defence with which to cut through the muck of romanticism. It was so vitally important to keep one's sense of proportion at concert pitch, never to lose sight of the fact that there were, after all, other things in life beside the physiological difference between male and female—this monstrous preoccupation with sex that obsessed the world—labelled love by poetic licence, but more licentious than poetic. . . . And women were responsible for it; he was convinced of that; they would not allow men to love simply, Latinly, and pass on to more important matters; they would not realise that sex was not the whole gamut of experience—was it not common to the lowest forms of life that crept and crawled upon this the least of the planets?—that it was of neither greater nor lesser importance than digestion or any other natural process or function. No, they must endow it with a fantastic glamour, a ridiculous importance, and make it the very theme of living, the sole source of all ecstasy and profundity. . . .

But a woman like Mary Thane a man could respect, not in the maudlin sentimental sense in which the phrase is generally used in connection with men respecting women, but as an intelligent individual. He suspected that very few women were that.

3

They spent the first week-end of their association together at her bungalow on the East Coast. It was new country for him, and it enchanted him. He liked the great sweeps of gorse-golden common going flatly to the white line of the sea in the distance; he liked the fir trees and the sand-dunes, and the sense of space and distance that reminded him of the great plain below Mount Royal. He liked the tawny sails of ships that appeared to stick up out of the meadows, and the salt tang of that exhilarating East Coast wind that carried upon it always the scent of gorse and heather

and bracken, the cry of gulls and the song of skylarks. It was country with a definite personality, uncompromising, vigorous.

Mary's bungalow on the edge of Sizewell Heath had white-washed walls, and a little garden reclaimed from the heath and from which was visible the lighthouse beyond Thorpeness. Beyond the garden was the sand, with its low dunes and grassy foreshore, and beyond that the grey-green North Sea toning with the greys and greens of the landscape.

They bathed and sunbathed, lay together amongst the coarse grass and sea-lavender, and amongst the deep bracken of the commons, and were happy. They hired horses at the little old town of Aldeburgh, and rode with the wind over the great wide stretches of heath, out to the gentle loneliness of Southwold, the wild remoteness of Dunwich. All his life Gilbert Stroud remembered the quality of those English days, sea-salt, wind-gorse-flavoured, wind-swept; and those quiet evenings when the twilight crept down in blue-grey veils out of the sky and seeped up mysteriously out of the sea, and out of the salt and sand and peat and marsh of the earth, and the lighthouse in the distance flickered its long rays and short, like a fitful yet paradoxically steadfast star.

At their second week-end there they decided not to return to Town, and for the whole of the summer they lived there in that little house between the common and the sea, and were equally conscious that they might have been supremely happy but for that nagging consciousness that they were wasting time. Mary had work to do—always there was upon her that driving desire to work, and there were the two months spent looking at America and Canada to make up for; and upon Gilbert that fugitive restlessness which told him that he should be gone from here; that already he had marked time too long.

"The trouble with us," Mary said one day, "is that we can neither of us count the world well lost for love, because we know darned well it isn't! But it must be comfortable when you can really believe that it is and haven't any conscience to nag at you about taking the line of least resistance. Being 'swep' away' by passion I believe it's called."

"You might at least pay me the compliment of pretending

you'd been 'swep' away,' " Gilbert reproached her. But still they lingered, till the bracken bronzed and with the evenings a cold mist crept up from the sea.

And one morning Gilbert wakened whilst Mary still slept, and got out of bed and leaned out of the window and sniffed a new quality in the cold clearness of the morning air, an indefinable, exciting quality as of spring, but with more tang to it, and quite suddenly he knew that this was summer's end and the end of a chapter. It was like the end of the Long Vacation.

When he turned away from the window Mary was awake and lay looking at him.

He said, " My dear, something tells me that it's time to go to Oxford. Do you mind? "

She was silent a moment, and then she said, " My heart minds terribly; my mind agrees with you. I've already missed autumn publication for my new book, and unless I get a move on I shall miss New Year publication. It's been wonderful—but there's that feeling of life being so short and there being so much to do. . . . "

" Is it a waste of time when one is happy, I wonder? "

" Yes, I think so, if one has any purpose in life. Happiness isn't constructive. "

" And have I any purpose in life? "

" I think so. You have to find yourself, haven't you? "

He laughed, a little ruefully. " I suppose so. Don't get up, Mary. Being as it's the last day of the ' hols,' as you might say, I'll go and make breakfast. "

He felt in indecently high spirits during that breakfast. Mary was a dear—but he wanted to go. Mary was right. Happiness wasn't constructive, it didn't get you anywhere. It was insidious, too, the more you had of it the more you wanted; it was a kind of drug, a lotus-eating. . . .

Mary was aware of this, too, but it did not exhilarate her. This work-conscience, she thought, could be a damn nuisance. . . . She felt humiliated because all through breakfast a small hopeless hope persisted in her, that perhaps after all Gilbert would change his mind and stay just a little longer. . . .

But Gilbert packed in high spirits, and looked up trains with an undisguised eagerness, and it was obvious that he had no doubt

at all but that even the most delightful of summer idylls should rightly come to an end with the Long Vacation.

They parted in the garden of the little house—being agreed upon the subject of railway platform good-byes, the embarrassment of those dragging minutes in which there is no time to say anything that matters, and in which everything that needs to be said has already been said, the unavoidable atmosphere of anti-climax.

And Gilbert wanted to carry away with him a picture of Mary with the sea before her and the heath behind; it should be there, he felt, or in her room looking out on to Sloane Square, that they should say 'Good-bye,' and they happened to be there.

She said, a little wistfully perhaps, in spite of her smile, "Think of me sometimes, even if you don't come back."

He gave her a little shake. "Don't be morbid, Mary. I don't need to think of you—you'll always be there, at the back of all my thoughts; you're in my life. And it's not a question of my coming back or staying away—it's unthinkable that we shouldn't meet again."

He kissed her, holding her to him, compassionately rather than passionately.

She said, "Would it bore you terribly if I said that I loved you?"

He gripped her wrists firmly. "No, Mary—you mustn't—it puts you in a line with all the silly little flappers and the dreadfully emotional people in books."

"But I'm not a silly little flapper, and I'm not a person in a book, and I happen to know what I'm talking about and mean what I say." She smiled up at him, but there was no smile in her eyes, only a darkness.

"You can't love a person who isn't lovable, and I'm not; I'm much too much of an egotist; I'm what one of your reviewers would call 'an unsympathetic character.'" He, too, smiled, but his eyes were serious. "And you," he added, "are much too intelligent to squander yourself upon an egotist."

"You're all wrong." There was a kind of despair in her voice. "You're all wrong about so many things, Gilbert, and you'll find out just how wrong one day." She forced herself to smile again, and the darkness of her eyes lighted a little. It was imperative that one should not become emotional—outwardly, anyhow.

"But anyhow, my dear, you're terribly good-looking—much too good-looking to be safe for a person with so many complexes and such a wrong point of view. You'd better go before I begin to diagnose your neurosis all over again."

He laughed. "It would be more interesting than telling me you love me, anyhow."

He kissed her again. "Au revoir, dear thing."

"Au revoir, my dear. Write me a postcard sometimes."

"I will. With-love-and-kisses-from-all-to-all."

She watched him striding over the road across the common. So young, she thought, and with so much to learn, and so much to unlearn.

She watched him until he was out of sight, where the road curved round by a group of firs clustered about twin haystacks. So foolish to have hoped that he might look back; still more foolish to be hurt because he hadn't. . . . Young lover . . . who could not love. . . .

She pressed a hand tightly to a throat that suddenly ached and went indoors, averting her eyes from the bedroom with the unmade bed. In the sitting-room she groped on her untidy work-table for her cigarettes. She lit a cigarette resolutely and removed the cover from the portable typewriter.

Well, anyhow, work was left one—and thank God for that! And in the end it wasn't going to matter very much whether one had been happy or sad; all that was going to matter was how much work one had managed to get done, and what it was worth. At all costs, whatever life did to one, or failed to do, one had to carry on. . . .

For many years now Mary Thane had been in the habit of turning to work as to a drug.

OXFORD AND AN ECHO

IT was at Oxford that there was brought home to Gilbert Stroud the realisation that he was of an in-between generation, neither pre-war nor post-war. The terrific spate of youth which surged across the college quadrangles and up and down the High was definitely post-war, compost of youngsters who had been at their various public schools during the four vital years; they had been too young to appreciate the significance of those years in the social and moral history of the world. But his generation had stood upon the thresholds of manhood and war at one and the same time; they were a middle generation, too old for the post-war generation, yet too young for that generation of men that the ebb-tide of the war had left in their thirties.

But this post-war Oxford was not as young as his pre-war M'Gill; there was a new and more sombre thread woven into its texture by the men whose careers had been broken off by the interruption of the war, and who had come back, automatically, when it was all over, to carry on where they had left off. "That's that," they said in effect in 1918, "Now where did we get up to?" There was, too, the man who had been cut off by the war from getting to Oxford at all, and who had come back now, some four or five years later; so that it was an older Oxford, not quite so wide-eyed in spite of the normal overflow from the public schools. An overflow, too, from the world-war, men whom the war had caught up in its tentacles as it had caught him, and who had struggled for a while with the monster and finally escaped from its toils before its debauch of man-eating was finished, and had brought what was left of their bodies and souls back for what, in terms of life, amounted to a form of super post-graduate career.

Gilbert took a room at the Mitre and was almost intolerably lonely, but he had the feeling that Oxford was where he should be, and that presently it would yield a clue, though he scarcely knew to what, except that it had to do with the jigsaw puzzle of this chaotic business of post-war living.

Englishmen, it seemed to him, took longer than colonials in completing their education; he had finished with the University by the time the war caught him up, but he supposed that had he

been pursuing a leisurely English education the war would have caught him up, too, midway in his career—only he knew that he wouldn't have come back. It bewildered him that men should be able to regard the war as an episode, an interlude in their University careers, and come back and take up the laid-aside threads. He wanted to know what the war had done to these men, or not done, that they could forget it so easily. They could not all have been ornamental war babies in officers' training corps when the Armistice was signed; there must be among them men who had seen active service and suffered as he had suffered, coming back when it was all over because of some indomitable flame in themselves. But how amongst the one-and-twenty colleges of Oxford, and he attached to none of them, was he to find them? He was glad that he had been firm in refusing that post-graduate course his father had wanted for him. He wouldn't have fitted in. Youth predominated in spite of the war, and the lost legion of his generation was simply so many needles in a vast haystack of youth. The great tide of virgin youth terrified him.

He watched it lunching its mother and sisters amongst the coats of arms of the Mitre restaurant; watched it from his window of an evening rushing up and down the High on motor-cycles, or playfully running off with hawkers' barrows and leaving them stranded in the middle of the street; he watched it in tea-shops being boisterous with buns and earnest over ice-creams, and he would feel like its collective uncle, or a matron among a lot of young girls. Such high spirits, such devastating playfulness. . . . There were times when Oxford made him feel quite middle-aged. The consciousness of having graduated from M'Gill and also from a world-war tainted his inspection of this post-war Oxford with a pronounced superiority complex.

There was an afternoon when he sat under the trees beside the Cherwell, where it skirts the botanic gardens. He had been looking at Magdalene and thinking of Samuel Stroud, who had passed his undistinguished University career in its lovely shadow. Gilbert had never known him, but had always hated the grim-looking oil-painting of him that hung over the mantelpiece in his father's dining-room. He could picture his father, with his gay insolent eyes and swaggering gait, at Oxford, but not that tyrannical, puritanical

Samuel Stroud, because it was as impossible to think of him in terms of youth as not to think of Oxford in those terms.

In the school playing-fields across the stream a Rugger match was in process, the whoops and yells and the spasmodic concerted cheers of the onlookers carried across the water like small explosions. Gilbert watched them through a tracery of copper beech and wondered how many youngsters were surreptitiously showing each other card tricks to while away the tedium of the afternoon, cheering automatically at the right moments for the benefit of hovering prefects. Odd, this English insistence on games, this preoccupation with sport; at school you played cricket, or Soccer, or Rugger, according to the season; at college you sculled, in singlet and shorts, in the teeth of an east wind or the sweltering sun of afternoons only constituted for punting. If you didn't do that, you were expected to be æsthetic and preserve the Shelley tradition. Extraordinary, he thought. There were, after all, other sports; there was riding, there was swimming, there was ski-ing—and when he thought of these things, and of ski-ing in particular, an immense nostalgia for Montreal would seize him. . . . Ski-ing by the light of the mountain cross of St. Jean Baptiste, its blue electric glow flung out over the snow . . . and those nights when the falling snow hid the mountain-top and the great cross hung blazing in space . . . the dry cold of the air, the great shouts of laughter, the great white spaces glistening in that unearthly blue light. . . . That was the sort of thing he had dreamed about in France—the cleanness and virility and utter sanity of it.

At Christmas, he told himself, he would go to St. Moritz; and to-morrow he would leave for Paris; a week at Oxford was enough when you didn't belong there. He was tired of the shoals of undergraduates and the sight of rowing eights. It was a sultry Indian summer afternoon, and the energy in the playing-fields across the stream made him feel hot. He thought of the sting that invigorated an East Coast day even when the sun was hottest—one could breathe there. . . . Here, suddenly, he felt hemmed in, stifled. He leaned back against the trunk of the giant copper beech beneath which he sat and wondered whether in view of the shortness of the October afternoon it was worth while going to hire a punt; and what this fellow coming up alone in the punt

now would say if he suddenly leaned down the bank and suggested that he should take a passenger. Fun to act on an impulse once in a way. But the fellow would probably prove to be a frightful bore; encounters with strangers were always a risk. It would be pleasant just to drift along in the sun-mottled shadows with Mary Thane; then one needn't talk if one didn't want to, and she wouldn't expect to be made love to. She was a comfortable sort of person to be with, he reflected, and so few people were that; usually they sapped one by the demands they made on one, or by the intrusion of their personalities. Mary never intruded; it was one of the qualities which made her so restful.

The punt drew level with where he sat, and he was suddenly shocked out of his apathy. He had seen that face before. The white unforgettable intensity of it; the dark blazing intensity of those eyes with that look of something that is tortured yet will not surrender, something that cannot forget the passionate bitterness of its resentment, and carries it through torment. That shock of black hair falling over the high brow; that bitter mouth; that taut body with its suggestion of unbreakable resistance. . . .

The punt drifted past without its occupant looking up. There was the light ripple of its backwash for a few moments, and then nothing to show that the waters had been cleaved, nothing. . . . But Gilbert Stroud had a vision of himself groping feverishly in dark untenanted rooms, looking for something, something that he knew was there, if only he could lay hands on it, hiding from him, knowing that he was seeking for it, laughing at him secretly, with a sort of dark, derisive laughter. . . .

Why did the under-stratas of his mind refuse to give up their secret? There had been some importance attached to the last time he had seen that white face; why did his mind resist remembrance? One saw vaguely interesting people at parties, and seeing them again later could not recall where one had seen them; but there was nothing disturbing about that because it did not matter; it was not that the mind resisted the thought of them, but that the subconscious had never absorbed them; they had not happened to one at any vital point of one's life; there was no bloom of destiny upon the wings that touched one in passing.

Destiny! The name we give to the inevitable, he thought, our

explanation of the inexplicable; our attempt to reconcile coincidence with ordinariness; the explanation that accounts for but does not explain. One told oneself that one did not accept those unscientific metaphysics of the destiny that shaped our ends; prided oneself on one's scepticism; attempted to interpret the sequence of events in terms of mathematics—and that was the nearest one got to accounting for anything. Life worked itself out like a vast mathematical problem; one accounted that way for its relentlessness, and its quality of inevitability; destiny for the sentimentalists, mathematics for the sceptics; and one never learned the answer to the proposition anyhow.

He rose and walked slowly through the gardens and back along the High, sultry with afternoon. He would go to his room and pack for Paris, spend that night in London. His interest in Oxford was exhausted. He wished that Mary had not gone to live in the country. He debated with himself the worthwhileness of sending her a telegram to bring her to London. But it wouldn't be fair, he told himself, even supposing she got the wire in time, which was doubtful. There was just a chance, too, that she might be back in Town. He would ring her up when he arrived.

He rang up, but there was no reply. Destiny never obliges by special request.

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VI

REMEMBRANCE

I

THAT night Gilbert Stroud did not sleep. He had dined alone in his hotel and gone early to bed out of sheer boredom. It was exasperating of Mary to be in the country. He regretted that he had not chanced the possible effectiveness of a wire. He was disturbed and restless and did not want to be alone. It was as though a section of his mind had closed its shutters and something was going on behind them that he did not know about. He told himself that it was ridiculous to go to bed just when the night life of this great teeming city was beginning to awaken and stir to activity; but the artificial pleasures that a city offers are not for solitary enjoyment.

He lay tossing in the darkness, and presently dozed. In his light sleep he saw a white face and blazing eyes; the thing was trunkless in the darkness, like a mask painted on a black curtain. It looked at him without seeing him. Even in his sleep something said to him that those eyes had never seen him though they had rested on him. The white mask pressed forward through the darkness.

"You bloody swine," it said. "You bloody German swine!"

He knew that the words were not addressed to him. The eyes closed for a moment, and when they opened there was a scarlet weal on the white mask from the forehead to the mouth, and the lips were quivering. Something snapped then, in the picture and in Gilbert's dreaming brain; confusion rent the darkness, and out of the chaos a voice shouted hysterically, "My God! My God!"

Gilbert Stroud knew suddenly that it was he who had shouted himself awake.

He sat up in bed, trembling, his heart plunging furiously, his body wet with sweat. He sat there a moment, reeling midway between sleep and consciousness. As the mists that clouded his brain swirled back into the darkness he knew that he had been dreaming, but now his mind worked terrifically, like a powerful machine suddenly set in action by the releasing of a hidden spring.

That fellow at Oxford this afternoon. "You bloody German swine," he said, and then he struck him, and I shouted "My

God." . . . But it wasn't I at the time who shouted that; it was one of those Australians. . . . He had hysterics after this fellow had been struck across the face by that German officer with the whip—and when they had taken this Oxford fellow off to the solitary confinement huts for hitting back, the Australian went on having hysterics; he clung to the barbed wire, screaming that he wouldn't work; he wouldn't fight for the bastards, he yelled, so why should he work for them? They could strike him with a whip, too, if they liked; it wouldn't make any difference; there was some fight left in him yet. And then because he wouldn't let go the wire and march off to the salt mines and the quarries with the others, that mad German officer went berserk and struck at his wrists with his sword, and he dropped like a log, but not his hands. . . ."

He pressed his hands to his eyes, shuddering; the darkness seemed to drip blood; but his thoughts flowed on, ruthlessly.

He saw it all so clearly now; the compound in the German prison camp; himself being brought in with the fresh batch of prisoners up from that shambles of a hospital that had once been a church, and where the Belgian women prisoners were attending Germans and prisoners of war alike. . . . The great crowd of English and Australians lined up there and refusing to work, and the little group of German officers with the machine-gun. And this fellow he had seen at Oxford that afternoon, this young man in white gracefully poling a punt along a backwater between gardens and playing-fields . . . then he had worn dirty ragged khaki; it had been freezingly cold, and his bare feet were badly frost-bitten, like Gilbert's own, and he had stood there with his tall thin body taut, and it was he who had spoken for that sullen stubborn crowd.

He had said, "You can mow the lot of us down with your machine-gun—the British Government will have something to say about that—but there's not a man amongst us will work."

It was then that the officer with the whip had stepped forward and struck him in the face; that taut body had recoiled for a moment and then leapt forward and sent the German staggering backwards under the impact of a blow under the jaw. It was

then that the Australian boy had had hysterics and rushed over to the wire and clung there, and the old mad German had gone berserk. . . .

Gilbert remembered that the boy who had tramped along beside him up from the base hospital had swayed then, faintly; he had seen worse things before he had been captured, but he was weak with wounds and hunger, and the long barefoot march over the frozen ground that cut the feet like iron edges. Gilbert had never seen again the victim of the whip episode. He learned that he had been sent on to an unregistered camp after he was released from the 'cells,' as the solitary confinement huts were called; never seen him again until that afternoon . . . and then let him pass because his mind refused to recall that buried horror.

A sirocco of impotent rage swept him, a wild idea of cancelling all his plans for Paris and returning to Oxford. But, reason urged, as the sirocco collapsed, if he went back, how was he to find him? Was he to sit there day after day in the gardens on the off-chance of his punting past again? Had he not been a week in Oxford and seen him for the first time that day? He might spend weeks in Oxford and not come across him again; one could not tamper with destiny's mathematical calculations.

And yet—why that re-encounter? But that was absurd. Why look for any meaning in life? To-morrow, Paris and the real beginning of Poppa's Great Seeing-Europe Tour. Having endured so much in the rearrangement of Europe, one might as well go back when all the mess was cleaned up and see what it looked like. And then? Then one came back and settled down and made a very great deal of money and bought one's way into English society; found the woman who was to be the crown of all one's achievements, exchanged the Stroud wealth for English breeding, and, he supposed, proceeded to grow a little corpulent, a little self-satisfied, a little middle-aged in the process. And presently one would give up trying to round up life into a neat precise pattern, mathematically consistent. One would learn to accept it as formless and meaningless. . . .

Thus Gilbert Stroud, having emerged from a world-war a little cynical, a little restless, wholly at a loose end; too old to go back to school, too young to be turned loose into a world of shifting values,

sceptic and idealless, drifting in an age of unbelief like a rudderless ship in a choppy-sea.

2

On his second evening in Paris Gilbert wrote to Mary Thane for the first time since he had left her in the little garden at the edge of the sea. He wrote with an unexpected romanticism because he was intensely lonely, and his letter was a gesture of turning to her for comforting.

"Cherisette. Here I am, caught in the vast whirling mechanism of Paris, whilst you are a part of the great machine that is London. I think of its wheels revolving ceaselessly, with Piccadilly as a pivot, whilst I write this at a café within sight and sound of the throb of the Madeleine; two great machines manufacturing the stuff of life, weaving the pattern of ours in with the rest. How long before they reach that point in the pattern where our lives, yours and mine, converge?"

He supposed that as a writer she would be more conscious of the faultiness of the metaphor than of what he was trying to express—his loneliness, his consuming need of her, and this obsessing desire to see all the loose threads of life as ultimately weaving into one vast intelligent pattern.

He wrote: "I am convinced that Paris is the most heartless city in the world, because I can't conceive of any more completely heartless. London is heedless, but there's something almost hostile in the utter heedlessness of Paris. London is an indifferent matron; but Paris is a courtesan who can be cruel for her amusement; London ignores, but Paris mocks. One came here on leave during the war, and it was all lights and wine and laughter; it is still a marvellous place to have a good time in, I suppose, but not alone; and one's idea of a good time is apt to change. Why aren't you here? When the wind shakes the leaves down from the trees along the boulevards they make a little sighing sound which is your name, and a kind of old sorrow creeps up with the dusk under the trees of the Champs Elysées, a *chanson triste* of all the sad remembered things that have no meaning. Yesterday I stood by the 'flame of remembrance' under the Arc de Triomphe." . . .

He wrote that and stopped. He wondered if he could tell her

about that in terms that she as a woman could understand. He had stood there—and was back in No Man's Land, lying beside a shell-hole, groping for his revolver, trying to make up his mind whether to shoot himself or 'go through with it'; and then he was in the German base hospital, where things happened that you could never tell anyone because you knew that if you told them the least part they would imagine that you were exaggerating for the sake of dramatic effect; and he was in the compound at the prison camp, and there was that boy with the white face and the flaming eyes that looked at him again in their unquenchable defiance out of the heart of that leaping flame under the great arch. . . .

He had stood there, and a girl's voice had snapped the spell and brought him with a jolt back to the present.

"Oh, look, Maisie," she had shrilled, "don't you call that just too cute? We simply must buy a postcard of it!"

He had turned away savagely. Post-war! It didn't touch them, and now it's all over they go charabanc drives out to the battlefields and take snapshots, and in England they organised their emotions and arranged to remember the war and be harrowed for two minutes once a year, those who had stayed home and made money out of the war, those who had crept into soft jobs—and there were soft jobs out there as well as at home—and the young things whose war-time activities had been confined to loaning their youth and brightness for the comfort of the troops on leave, in exchange for a good time. . . . And if you tried to explain the frightful resentment that seethed in you when you thought of it, they said to you, soothingly, "Oh, come now, don't be bitter! It's all over now, and, after all, you weren't the only one!" They couldn't see that if you *had* been the only one it wouldn't have mattered, but there were thousands of you; it was the ghastly futility of it all that made you bitter; and it did something to you, some dark subterranean, poisoning thing that you couldn't explain . . . something that could not be eradicated; it was as though something in your soul had warped.

The flame of remembrance! It was because it was a flame that it didn't stand talking about. Some things weren't to be talked about. There were the inviolable reserves attaching to first and last things. So he added nothing to that statement of his

visit to the flame of remembrance, but left it, of no more importance—unless one had the gift of vision—than “I had coffee at Fouquet’s.”

He thought a moment more, then wrote: “The day I left Oxford I saw a man who was at the same prison camp, but he did not see me, and I did not remember where I’d seen him before until it was too late.”

Just that. He wanted to tell her of the surging emotions summoned up by that encounter, but it, too, belonged to the things that went too deep to be talked about.

He ended abruptly, “I am going to Marseilles to-morrow. *Tout à toi.* Gilbert.”

He thought, as he sealed the envelope, “It’s hopeless trying to talk to people about the things that matter to one. And anyhow, it’s futile trying to explain oneself to anyone else—it takes one all one’s time to explain oneself to oneself.”

Thinking reduced everything to futility—even thought itself. Somewhere he had read, “Nothing is completely true, including this statement.”

He tore the letter up and wrote a postcard

“Arrived in Paris last night; leaving for Marseilles to-morrow. Write you later. Cheerio. G.”

•

RE-ECHO

GILBERT had always wanted to go to Marseilles. At school, whenever he had looked at it on the maps, he had seen instantly a long street, vivid with very bright sunshine and thronging with people of all nationalities; it was in his imagination as a place at which called the most romantic ships of all the ports of the world, and where the sky was always a poster-blue. He had told himself that whatever other place disappointed him when he visited it, Marseilles could not fail him. He had an instinct for places. He had been sure about Quebec and about Oxford, and his instinct did not fail him in the matter of Marseilles.

The moment he stepped out of the station he was sharply aware of that queer, pungent flavour of the South, a strange exciting quality in the southern spiciness of the air, almost sexual in its indefinable intensity. It was an extension of the excitement which had seized him when he had looked out of the window of his wagon-lit apartment and seen Avignon, white houses, red roofs, slender poplars, pale and sleeping in the silver light of the early morning. With every kilometre it was as though the excitement of the South intensified, until at last it reached a crescendo, an ecstasy of life, with the morning heat lying in a thin blue-gold haze about the tree-lined streets, shadows blue on the façades of tall green-shuttered houses, and that feeling of vivid, virile life in the crowded, noisy streets, with their flower booths and paper kiosks and the cafés under striped awnings. And there was Notre Dame de la Garde poised, a guardian madonna, upon its hill, as he had pictured it, and the great curve of the bay, and the forest of masts and funnels along the quay.

At his hotel he did not stop to unpack. A room secured, he was impatient to get out and walk in those streets, taste the romantic reality of this city of his dreams. There was the Cannebière running up from the quayside to the little square with the stalls under the trees, so exactly as he had wanted it to be. A great surging, seething, clanging city this, but nothing hard about it; it was utterly dispassionate; international. Here you felt the warm pulse of life itself; were conscious of a subtle undercurrent of passion vibrating in the vast throbbing orchestra of its streets

savoured a sense of life, carnal, vital, intense; a red-blooded city of the world, not a pallid playground for tourists.

"Marseilles," they said vaguely. "Awfully dirty, don't you think, and so noisy, and nothing to see there, really, except Notre Dame de la Garde." So they allowed themselves to be hauled bodily up the hill in the hydraulic lift, the nervous ones laboriously climbing the steps, and they looked at the two churches built one on top of the other, and then they had seen 'all there is to see' in Marseilles. It was not like Paris, they said, there was so much to see in Paris, Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower, and things like that. . . .

But in Marseilles there was nothing—nothing but the coloured carnival of its streets and the romance of the ships from the ports of all the world unloading at its docks.

There were four-masted sailing ships from Sweden with cargoes of timber, on the day that Gilbert Stroud walked its quayside, and a battered steamer unloading oranges from Spain, and a quarrel between two negroes from God-knows-where. Gilbert found himself caught in the crowd that quickly gathered about them; he tried to extricate himself, but the ways of escape were blocked by a sweating, excited crowd. It was whilst struggling to force a passage through the crowd that he saw Nicholas Stemway again, for the third time in his life. He was standing at the far side of the little square, under a date palm, watching the crowd. He was hatless, and with his white face and strange eyes and the dank lock of hair falling over his forehead, unmistakable.

But by the time Gilbert had forced his way out of the crowd he had gone, swallowed up in the vortex that is Marseilles.

Gilbert had intended staying only a few days, but after that he stayed a week in Marseilles, and at every café, and along the Cannebière, and under the trees of the Prado, and along the seawall, and from end to end of the quay, he sought that tall, nervous figure and that white, haunted and haunting face. That he might find him and speak to him, the lines of their lives converge for a moment as part of an intelligible pattern, might be the negation of reason, but it was also the affirmation of some meaning in life—and still, in spite of scepticism, he sought a meaning.

But at the end of a week, his search unsuccessful, reason again

whispered that destroying thought of futility, and he left for Cannes, whence he proceeded to work his way along the Riviera, conscientiously, because the Riviera was an essential part of any Seeing-Europe itinerary, and ornamental palms, white casinos, and alleged fashionable promenades shrieked at him an even greater futility than a search for meaning in life, and he was utterly bored. Until he came to Florence, and destiny in the form of an American infantilist with a guide-book in one hand and a camera in the other took him in charge.

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VIII

SEEING EUROPE

I

GILBERT was sitting very peacefully on the low wall that hems Fiesole in on its hill-top above the lovely valley of the Arno, when Philip Raymore walked into his life down a narrow cobbled alleyway of a street. He was twenty-two years old, five foot high, and clothed in very voluminous knickerbockers of bold design, a blue yachting jacket with brass buttons, and a beret; the originality of the ensemble was completed by golfing hose terminating in rope-soled canvas shoes, which, he subsequently explained to Gilbert, were expressly designed to prevent one slipping on the cobbles of Italian villages. "Such a good idea, I think." They only cost ten lira, he added, and urged Gilbert to buy a pair; he even offered to buy them for him if Gilbert would tell him what size, and whether he liked a broad fitting; personally, he said, he always asked for a broad fitting; he thought it helped, though what it helped he did not define.

Short of plunging head foremost into the view, Gilbert perceived no way of escape, and Philip Raymore fastened upon him with a friendly smile and an American accent.

"Excuse me, but I saw you in the dining-room of our hotel last night, and I did so want to know you. Being on one's own, and when one sees another person alone. . . . that one instinctively likes, I mean. . . . I felt that you were lonely, and that we might have much in common. And now this chance meeting—like Fate. . . . My name's Philip Raymore. From Boston."

Gilbert regarded him disapprovingly from the tip of his beret, like the tail of a baby pig, to the laces of his non-skid footwear.

"Really?" he said coldly, and went on looking at the domes and spires of Florence glistening below in a mist of sunlight.

But Philip Raymore was not discouraged. "Yes. I know you Britishers think some of us American tourists are simply arful, and maybe we are, but I guess it isn't American tourists particularly, but just tourists. We Yanks only think we're the salt of the earth, but you Britishers know you are!"

Gilbert grinned. "Did you make that up? Or did someone tell you? Or did you read it in a book?"

Raymore flushed. "I beg your pardon, but what I wanna convey is—some of us bring a vurry real appreciation to Europe. I've just gone simply *crazy* on Florence. I guess it's just *marvellous*—Giotto's tower and the Baptistery. . . . And San Lorenzo. . . . The Medici Chapel. . . . It's not the Sistine Chapel, of course, but Florence, I mean, isn't Rome. . . ."

"No," said Gilbert, "I gathered that." His irritation at this strange person's intrusion on him was melting, and he turned and looked at him again, but wonderingly this time.

Raymore blushed more deeply. Gilbert discovered later that he always blushed if anyone looked at him directly, and as owing to his odd appearance and manner people constantly did, he lived in a perpetual state of embarrassment, in seeking to extricate himself from which he only floundered more deeply.

"I mean," he said, "one's sculpture and the other's painting—Michael Angelo, I mean. . . . Two aspects of a great genius. . . ."

It was not a stupid face, Gilbert decided, the eyes were eager, discerning, the mouth mobile, sensitive, and his smile and self-conscious nervous manner had a queer charm.

Under the encouragement of Gilbert's smile Raymore sat down beside him on the wall and squinted at the view through the view-finder of his camera.

"I wouldn't," said Gilbert. "You can buy quite excellent picture postcards of it."

Raymore sighed. "In any case, I have no more films left. I thought you wouldn't mind—my speaking to you, I mean. I mean, if one doesn't—so difficult always, I think, getting to know people. . . ."

"Oh rather," said Gilbert, now thoroughly amused. "Have a cigarette?"

"So kind of you. But I don't smoke. Or drink. You're from London?"

"No, Montreal."

"You're Canadian, then? So interesting, I think, finding out about people."

He regarded a different angle of the view through the camera's view-finder again, blushing deeply, as though he had made the most intimate confession or the most daring remark. When his

colour had faded a little he lowered the camera again and volunteered, "I write—in a way."

"Why 'in a way'?"

"I mean—anthologies; and guides to literature; the hundred best books; how to enjoy books; that sort of thing."

He smiled as he said it, and Gilbert could not be sure whether he took this strange form of literary activity seriously, or whether he wrote it with his tongue in his cheek—or merely to earn a living he could earn no other way. Not quite knowing what he was expected to say, he changed the subject. He said what he considered a safe thing to say, regretting that all the safe things had to be so banal.

"Florence is very beautiful, don't you think?" To that, anyhow, the creature must surely answer explicitly yes or no. The spineless, unpredicated state of so many of his sentences began to be a little tiring. . . .

But he answered, "Florence—my spiritual home—I can't tell you. . . ."

Gilbert said, half amused, half exasperated by that trail away into asterisks, "I'm quite sure you can't," and then seeing Raymore's painful flush repented. "I mean," he supplemented, unconsciously using Raymore's pet phrase, "one cannot explain why any place is one's spiritual home, if it is."

"I mean," said Raymore, "I collect mosaics—the famous Florentine mosaics, you know. And ivory crucifixes. Very interesting. Do you paint at all?"

"No," said Gilbert, "not even slightly. Nor write, nor anything. I am one of those who toil not, neither do they spin. Not at all interesting."

Raymore looked wistfully at the white and rosy cluster of Florence down below. "All our family does water-colours," he announced, as who should say, "All our family takes in washing."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

It was, Gilbert thought, the most concise statement he had made.

Suddenly Raymore started. "There's a tram. They told me I could get a tram. At three forty-five they said." He bared his

wrist to look at his watch, and it was then that Gilbert noticed his bracelets; he wore several on each wrist, with little charms dangling.

"I guess they were right," said Gilbert. "We'd better go."

On the way down to the tram's starting-point opposite the cathedral in the *piazza*, Raymore told Gilbert a vague and rambling story about a man who had got locked in the cathedral at Seville and seen a monk pursuing a nun, and reported the fact to the British Embassy next morning, and been arrested for having seen such a thing.

"I mean, so extraordinary," said Raymore, "why the British Embassy? But then in Spain. . . . When I was in Madrid. . . . There was a vicar's daughter standing on a railway bridge and saying aloud, 'Once a tomboy, always a tomboy.' Aloud, like that. Extraordinary."

Gilbert agreed, and was tempted to ask, wickedly, "How did you know she was a vicar's daughter? And was it just any vicar's daughter and any railway bridge?"

"Oh," Raymore replied, "there's only one railway bridge. And we knew the family."

As the tram wound its way down the hillside and back to Florence he recounted several more stories of similar vagueness. They began with a wealth of detail, but invariably came to nothing, trailed away into nebulousness and asterisks. He laughed a good deal over each of these incipient anecdotes, and asserted that they were most amusing, or most extraordinary, but he never reached the point of any of them—if there was any point, which Gilbert was inclined to doubt—save in his own mind.

By the time they alighted at the Duomo back in Florence, Gilbert began to like this odd person. He was amusing—not quite as the raconteur he seemed to imagine himself, but by sheer force of his inconsequence. You quite literally never knew what he was going to say next.

2

Gilbert invited Raymore to sit at his table during dinner that evening, and after dinner Raymore in turn invited him to have coffee in his room.

"The lounge here is awful," he said. "I call it the morgue. Old ladies. Professional old ladies. Terrifying."

Gilbert agreed. The public rooms of hotels were dreadful, always, whether they were full of professional old ladies such as, apparently, strewn the road to Rome, or bright young people who flaunted their knees at you and made eyes over their coffee-cups, and then ridiculously pretended to attempt to pull down their skirts when they had finally secured your attention.

Raymore's room, like his own, looked out over the Arno to the cypress-sentinelled *Piazzale Michelangelo* perched above it, but Raymore's room was at the top of the building, whereas his own was on the first floor.

"Forty lira a day," Raymore explained, waving his hand at the room. "No running water, but one gets the view. It's like being on a ship."

Gilbert looked at him drolly. "Is it?"

Raymore flushed from his forehead down to his chin. "I mean," he said, "the river immediately below one gives one the impression. Have you got a tin bed, too?" He indicated the black enamelled bedstead with the garish bouquet of pink and red roses tied up with blue streamers painted at the head and foot.

"Yes, but for my extra twenty lira a day mine is draped all bridally with a mosquito net, and I have running water, only it doesn't run."

Gilbert sat down on a three-legged, high-backed red plush chair with an antimacassar draped over the back, and looked round the room. Raymore stood watching him, eagerly, like a child who waits for some grown-up to approve its games and toys.

Fastened to the wall above the fireplace were photographs of the courtyard and staircase of the Bargello, of the Loggia de' Lanzi with a suggestion of Cellini's Perseus, and of Perseus with a suggestion of the Loggia.

"They always put fig leaves on the statues before they photograph them," Raymore sighed. "So indecent, I always think. I said that to an old lady at dinner the other night and she bridled. Actually bridled. Like an old war horse sniffing the air of battle. Whatever that means. Anyhow, she hasn't spoken to me since. Extraordinary minds some people have. . . . That water-colour

of the Ponte Vecchio I got at the stall in the Uffizi arcade. Ten lira. Rather nice, I think."

Gilbert regarded the water-colour with distaste. It was about as bad as anything could be, he thought. The mantelpiece and the top of the dressing-chest were littered with mosaics in the form of boxes, saucers, jewellery, and in simple art-for-art's-sake slabs, and there were crucifixes of all kinds and sizes. There were three imitation Della Robbia plaques on the walls, two Annunciations and one head of a Madonna, and picture postcards were scattered over the bed and floor.

During coffee Raymore rambled on inconsequently. Had Gilbert seen this, had he seen that? No? Oh, but he should! Yes? Wasn't it just too utterly marvellous? And there was Rome. Was he going on to Rome? Oh, but he should. All roads led to Rome. Inevitably. And he knew a German *pensione* where for forty lira a day you could have a room high up over the gardens of the Barberini Palace. *Roma!* He made an ecstasy of the word. But they should not go on to Rome until after Sunday, because on Sunday the Boboli gardens here in Florence were open to the public.

"We must go," he urged. "Dark avenues of trees, and fountains playing, like Versailles. . . . But at Rome, the Villa d'Este and the garden of fountains out at Tivoli. I was there last month before I went down to Naples."

"But if you did it all last month," said Gilbert, bewildered, "you can't want to go back so soon."

"I was going on to Venice, but——" He flushed vividly. "I'd like to go back to show Rome to you—it makes such a difference, being with someone. . . ."

Gilbert wanted to say that he did not require that Raymore or anyone else should organise a conducted tour round Rome and environs for his benefit, but the little American was so painfully eager, and there was, after all, as he said, something to be said for having a companion on this business of seeing Europe. He had not, in point of fact, seriously considered going down to Rome; his inclinations had turned rather towards Venice and the Lido, but he reflected that it was a little late in the year now for the Lido, and the line of least resistance was to go on to Rome with

this young infantilist who wore bracelets and wrote guides to literature.

3

After coffee a walk seemed indicated. Raymore said he knew a café in the Piazza Victor Emmanuel. They walked along the Arno and turned in under the arcade of the Uffizi and came out into the Piazza della Signoria, wide and empty in the blue night, the turret of the Palazzio Vecchio reared against the stars like the tower of an ogre's castle in a fairy-tale. Under the dark arches of the Loggia de' Lanzi the Romans carried off the Sabine women, and Perseus held aloft the Gorgon's head. Gone were the post-card sellers and the guides, and the gaping tourists staring at the official sights; gone the black mass of idlers and gossipers, and the spot where Savonarola burned was bared to the stars as on that night when the red pyre smouldered and the crowds dispersed. Odd, Gilbert thought, the thousands who tramped over that spot, heedlessly, stood there gossiping, spat there; saint, fanatic, criminal, it did not matter to them who had burned there; it was dead history, something that had happened long ago and did not concern them; nothing was sacred, nothing remembered; there was a tablet let into the ground, or a column of stone was reared aloft, or a flame kindled, and the hearts that ached and the minds that remembered, they too passed, and future generations came and glanced cursorily, and it meant nothing; nothing remained static in the shifting chaos of things, save humanity's vast indifference. . .

If only one could make something matter, salvage something from this wreck of futility! If one were an artist consciously striving to create something of beauty, he supposed then that one might overcome this sense of futility. Such beauty as Michael Angelo, Cellini, Giambologna, Donatello, Da Vinci, and the rest of that great company of the Renaissance had wrought, lived on through the centuries, the negation of futility. Did the issue resolve itself into that, then, that only beauty mattered, only the sense of poetry implicit in things endured? Was that the only escape from futility? In the end was it only the artist who mattered, beauty the only glimmering of truth in the dark chaos of living? If that were so, then if one were not a creative artist, what was left one but to make

some of the beauty of the world one's own? Money was futile, power impotent, unless one transmuted these things into the beauty one was unable to create. Man reached up to the stars with empty, supplicating arms, but a terrene mist was between him and the stars; only the artist could see the stars by their own blinding celestial light, because 'he on honeydew hath fed and drunk the milk of Paradise.' . . . The rest of us, thought Gilbert Stroud, bitterly, see a firmament ablaze with pounds and dollars; by the gross alchemy of our inherent materialism we thus transformed the stars. . . . And yet, his thoughts pushed on, did not great Zeus come to Danaë in the brass tower in a shower of gold? And in human form could hapless Semele receive her celestial lover, whereas coming in his godhood he destroyed her utterly. For how can mortality receive beauty, which is of the gods, other than transmuted through the medium of earthly things? Only the artist's vision was pure and stedfast enough for him to be able to look upon the naked stars; for the rest of us there was the lust for possession; money danced before our eyes, and money was the magnet that could drain the stars out of the sky—but it left its stain imprinted on their beauty. If one could be content to look upon beauty afar off, cold and remote and virginal, without that desire to possess that involved the ravishment of beauty. . . .

But the beauty of a woman was not like the beauty of a dream and could not be destroyed with possession; you could not count her lovers in her eyes, for they were the shutters drawn over the secrets of our soul. She might be the Mary Magdalene and all the other Marys, and yet look like the Virgin Mary. . . . He wanted no such woman for the mockery of his soul. The woman whose face floated dimly in the nebulae of the stars had no lovers; she was too proud; she was inviolate and inviolable as the morning star. Not for Gilbert Stroud of the long line of arrogant Stroud men, a flower in the grass that anyone might stop and pick; he would reach up to the stars and pluck the morning star itself, and its blazing beauty should consume the imprint of the magnet that had drawn it out of the heavens. . . .

Thus Gilbert Stroud groping through the assailing beauty of a Florentine night for the ends of being.

IX

TRIPLE ALLIANCE

I

AT the end of the week Gilbert allowed Raymore to conduct him to Rome and a German *pensione* in the Via Venete Settembre.

"So much more amusing in a pension," he assured Gilbert; "rare types."

Left to his own devices, Gilbert would undoubtedly have drifted to one of the palatial hotels run on American lines in the Via Veneto. His presence at the *albergo-pensione* on the Lung-Arno had been a sheer accident; he had been seized upon by its porter when he had emerged from the station, his luggage confiscated, and himself hustled into an auto-bus before he had had time to look round; and this first experience of life *en pension* left him dubious; it seemed to him that whatever the advantages in the matter of economy and quietness, there were big counter disadvantages in the matter of bad food and depressing atmosphere. Raymore himself had said that the trouble with pensions was that one never had enough to eat, so that what one saved on the pension terms one lost on sundry *consommations* taken outside at cafés between meals.

Raymore assured him, however, that the German *pensione* was a pension with a difference.

"But you'll get the same professional old ladies," Gilbert urged. "There's a floating population, isn't there, that undertakes to feed the cats in the Trajan Forum?"

"But it's old-ladyism with an international flavour," Raymore replied. "Anglo-Indians and Fraus, and girls of forty-five passionately devoted to Etruscan research. And then the food's so good—such heaps of it, and it's all run on very businesslike lines. So efficient; you eat by numbers, as it were. A bell goes and you come to table; another bell and you're served; another bell and the plates are cleared away. So amusing."

Gilbert found that you entered this so amusing place by way of a great cool dark arch that gave on to a sort of *patio*, where a little fountain played half-heartedly among home-sick aspidistras and implements of the housemaid's trade. You then mounted what

at times seemed like thousands of steps. The lift was only occasionally in action. Raymore was equally happy with stairs or lift.

Concerning the stairs he said, "I always think it depends who one climbs them with. So Freudian."

And he took a childish delight in sending the lift back after it had borne them up to the top floor. You pressed a button and it meekly sunk down to earth again. "Such a good thing," said Raymore, peering affectionately after it down the shaft.

The street cars afforded him a similar satisfaction. "Such great docile creatures," he would say as they clanged past within a sixteenth of an inch of him, Roman fashion. "I always think that if I were a tram I'd run off the lines—just to assert myself. It must be dreadful, I always think, being forced to run along the same lines day after day . . . like the mules of Las Palmas."

"What on earth do you mean?" There were frequently occasions such as this, even after Gilbert had grown used to Raymore's inconsequence, when this surprising person could completely bewilder him. And then Raymore would flush confusedly and stumble into a welter of explanations that as often as not did nothing but further obscure his meaning.

"I mean," he said, concerning the trams, "I used to think when I was at Las Palmas, in the Canaries, and saw the mules, such patient things . . . the same hot white dusty roads day after day—what fun it would be if they were to revolt and go rushing away over the bare hills beyond the reach of man. Trams are sentient things, too. Inanimate things often are. Like Bacon says about books not being absolutely dead things but do contain a potency of life in them."

It was entirely natural for Philip Raymore to arrive at books via street cars and mules. He seemed entirely unable to control his mind's association of ideas, with the inevitable result that invariably in his conversation the thoughts so clearly associated in his own mind always tended to obscure his meaning where his listeners were concerned. The remarks, which seemed so many irrelevancies in his conversations, fitted in perfectly in the jig-saw puzzle of his thoughts, but he always left half a thought behind in his mind when he spoke, so that his phrases were delivered shorn of their context.

Gilbert found him alternately exasperating and amusing; if one were cruel enough one might bait him mercilessly and very amusingly; but, he reflected, it would be rather like teasing a trusting and rather attractive child.

2

The first evening they came down to dinner in the German *pensione* in the Via Venete Settembre Gilbert encountered Nicholas Stemway for the fourth time. He was sitting at the table at which they were placed.

He glanced up as they seated themselves. There was no interest in his eyes, merely the faint irritation that pension-dwellers always experience when newcomers arrive at their table.

Gilbert said, breathlessly, as they sat down, "This is extraordinary. I saw you in Marseilles two weeks ago."

Stemway replied laconically, helping himself from the dish of spaghetti the waitress held for him, "As I happened to be there at that time it doesn't strike me as at all extraordinary. Anyone is liable to be seen anywhere."

"But you don't understand—it *is* extraordinary! I saw you at Oxford before that—and before that at Parchim. That was where I saw you for the first time. That's why it's so extraordinary meeting you here in Rome—in a German pension!"

Stemway's bored indifference had vanished at that word—Parchim. He tossed the black lock of hair back from his brow, and his manner suggested a suppressed excitement. "You were there?" He leaned towards Gilbert, and his eyes were black blazing fires. "They sent me to a worse place afterwards. I'd refused to work, and they put me in the cells, and then they sent me on to the sort of place the British Government never knew about—until it was all over."

He began to eat ravenously, as though his body had suddenly remembered all the meals it had gone without, and between mouthfuls he muttered, "Parchim! My God! Parchim!" And then suddenly he laughed and tore off bread and crammed it into his mouth, as though to gag the laughter.

"From German prison to German pension in two reels," he said. "Talk about *Ruhleben* and back—*Ruhleben* was a *crèche* compared with Parchim!"

"Extraordinary," Raymore murmured.

"What the hell do *you* know about it?" Stemway snapped, and Raymore concentrated on his curry, flushing painfully.

Gilbert said, "That day at Oxford—I knew I'd seen you before—but I couldn't remember. It was as though my mind didn't want to remember. You were in a punt—so close I could have reached out to you and touched you; but I couldn't remember."

Stemway appeared not to be listening. "And then," he said, savagely shovelling curry, "there was the revolt of the sailors, and the Armistice, and the march through Hamburg, and the respectable *hausfraus* who would sleep with you for half a tin of bully-beef. They were starving—but, my God, we'd starved, too. . . . *Sauerkraut*—did they give you that filth? And bread you had to soak and ring the mould out of before you could eat it, and your inside turning to water till you were too weak to stand? . . . But look here, we can't talk here; this din—these people—steam—the smell of food. . . . Let's go out afterwards and have coffee, then we can talk."

"I have a friend with me," Gilbert said, and introduced Raymore. Stemway did not look up.

"My name's Stroud," Gilbert went on, "Gilbert Stroud. I was at St. Eloi and Courcellette before they carried me off in a canvas trough. I had a commission, so they didn't require me to work."

"I was an N.C.O., but they took my uniform when I was captured, and all my papers, and I couldn't prove it. But I wouldn't have worked, anyhow."

He looked at Raymore. "You were in this mess, too?"

"The war?"

"No, the international picnic; Daddy's Greatest."

Raymore flushed. "I was at college."

Stemway regarded him with smouldering eyes. "Oh, so you were at kull-ege, were you? I thought perhaps it was a seminary. Didn't you get through with kull-ege in time to help God's-own-country win the war?"

The savage intensity of contempt in his voice shocked Gilbert. He was convinced afterwards that Stemway's incurable dislike of Raymore was conceived in that moment. He said hurriedly,

"Oh, for God's sake don't let's quarrel about who won the war. What are you doing now?"

"Working for my living. I finished up at Magdalene with the summer vacation, but I kept my room on because my mother was here in Rome and expecting me to join her. I was holding on waiting for news. A friend of hers at the British Embassy here got me a job at the Royal Institute of Agriculture. I wanted to come to Italy, and there aren't so many jobs going, anyhow, these days, that one can afford to turn anything down. When she went back to England I moved into here—I've only been here a few days. Anything else you'd like to know? Was twenty-six last birthday. Father, schoolmaster. Was born and bred in the Cotswolds. Favourite amusements, the Russian ballet, the League of Nations, and the works of Jean Cocteau. Educated Rugby and Oxford. Sports, swimming, and polo—and baiting Americans. What else?"

"What is the Royal Institute of Agriculture?"

"Something like our Ministry. A sort of league of nations. You check the rainfall of Czecho-Slovakia and annual output of grain in Urania, and write a report about it. We bring out a magazine which is presumably of international importance, and we have a great many codes and departments and filing systems." He smiled suddenly, and the bitterness was wiped from his face like writing from a slate; he looked young, eager—how he must have looked before the war caught him in its tentacles and twisted something in him, Gilbert thought. "It's all very vague and involved. I don't know much about it yet. If you've finished, let's go and sit at the Café Greco."

They rose, leaving Raymore still digging into a sponge pudding. He looked up at them wistfully. Gilbert was reminded of the eyes of a dog that yearns to be taken for a walk, yet cannot ask save with its eyes.

He said, "You don't mind, do you, Raymore? We'd bore you frightfully with our war-time reminiscences."

"It will be much more fun sitting with the old ladies," said Stemway. "We have here some unique and remarkable specimens. There's a lady who has lived in India and hunted big game, and can't forget it. I always stare at her at embarrassing moments,

such as when she is ejecting a prune stone from her lady like lips, or has encountered a bone in her filleted plaice, or is engaged in a hand-to-mouth bout with the pension chicken. She told a friend that I was a young man with no experience of life. Capital L. She thinks I'm a Finn."

Gilbert laughed. "Good Lord, why?"

"Oh, I don't know. She came up to me the other day after coffee in that mausoleum they call the drawing-room and said, 'You're not an Englishman, are you?' and something made me answer, 'No, I'm a Finn.' She said, with great relief, 'I knew you couldn't be an Englishman; no Englishman ever talks as you were talking at dinner to-night.'"

"And how were you talking?"

"Oh, I'd heard her remark to the antimacassar-draped spinster opposite her that only people who have ever lived in India—she puts an aspirate at the end—had any sense of Empire or appreciated what a profound privilege it was to be British. So I remarked in German to the German doctor opposite me that only those who had ever stayed in a continental pension ever had cause to regret being British, and what did he estimate the floating population of British spinsters, Anglo-Indian females, colonel's wives and clergyman's widows might be in Rome alone. The old boy liked that, and wuffed into his soup like anything. How was I to know the dear lady understood German? But now she thinks I'm a Finn she doesn't mind nearly so much; to know all is to forgive all. She feels that the British Empire hasn't been let down, do you see. In future I'm a Finn for all pension purposes. It saves an enormous amount of trouble—any little eccentricity or touch of subversiveness is instantly accounted for. The poor fellow's a Finn. We're quite friendly now. She thinks I live on blubber and wear seal skins in my native state. She tells me about Calcutta and I tell her about Finland. Where *is* Finland, by the way?"

Gilbert laughed, but Raymore looked puzzled. "I don't understand—I mean, why Finn? It's so odd. Like fish, I mean——" he floundered, reddening under Stemway's amused gaze. "Finns—fish—the association of ideas. So unusual. The idea of anyone being a Finn, I mean. Like being an Icelander."

"Same locality, I believe," Stemway remarked drily, and turned

to Gilbert. "Come on, Stroud, our little friend wants to go away and play Finns with the memsahib himself."

"Extraordinary creature, your American friend," he remarked as they descended the stone stairs. "I like his bangles. Charming, I think. Where did you find him?"

"I didn't. He found me, sitting on a wall at Fiesole, and he's barely let me out of his sight since. He told me the other evening, blushing all over, that I had the same sort of beauty as Lysippus' Mercury in the Naples Museum, and that when we'd done with Rome we ought to go down to Naples so that I could see my double, but I said I thought Rome would be about all the antiquity I could stand."

"He sounds revolting. Do you think he thinks I resemble Narcissus by any chance?"

Gilbert laughed. "He's not bad, really. A bit of a behaviourist, that's all. Very sensitive."

"Fragile, with care?" Stemway looked drolly at Gilbert. "For God's sake don't start to explain that he has a beautiful nature, or anything like that. The war knocked out of me the little sentiment I ever had. Let's talk about ourselves—so much more interesting. What are you doing over here? Seeing Europe like a good little American?"

"Yes—but I'm Canadian. And I'm not so keen on seeing Europe as finding myself. I had to get away from Montreal. I was burning myself out there."

"Isn't it the only way to live—to burn life away?"

"I don't know. I'm one of the unfortunates who have no vocation. The war was a stop-gap. I plunged into it because it was something more interesting and exciting than what I was doing. I was in my father's business—shipping—the Strouds have been carrying merchandise all over the world since the days of wooden ships. But I didn't seem to get the feel of it, either before the war or when I came back afterwards. I was always a restless sort of devil." He laughed self-consciously. "It all sounds terribly undergraduate and young, I know, but I went through the war and came out on the other side still not knowing what I wanted to do—except to get back on life for all it had done during the past few years. I wanted a good time—and was bored when I had

it. I suppose a lot of us were like that. There's this frightful sense of futility."

"Your trouble, of course," Stemway remarked, "is that you aren't forced to work for your living."

They were walking down the hill of the Via Quattro Fontane, where the giant cedar tree in the gardens of the Barberini Palace reaches its arms out over the street like banners hung out for a *fiesta*. Gilbert saw it for the first time that night, black against the blue nocturne of the sky. Many times afterwards he walked up and down the street of the four fountains gay in the sunshine, but always he remembered it, along with Bernini's dolphin spouting water in the Piazza Barberini at the foot of the hill, as a night-piece, walking towards the Pincio when before the rising of the moon, with Nicholas Stemway . . . savouring for the first time the sharp sweet flavour of Rome.

"People who have to earn their livings haven't much time for introspection."

There was a veiled bitterness in Stemway's voice. "In a way, I suppose, it must be rather jolly wandering about Europe in search of oneself, one's *métier*, and all that. I suppose I'm as much of a lost person as you are, really, only I've got to stay lost if I am, because of the necessity for holding a job down. My father had set his heart on my going to Oxford—he himself had to be content with Liverpool; he and mother made a positive fetish of my going there—did everything short of actually fasting to get me there—and then I let them down, never did anything brilliant, and came down without a degree. They like to think that nevertheless I have a sort of changeling genius. Before the war I wanted to enter the Church—a queer sort of metaphysical parson I'd have made! Frankly adopting religion as a drug, teaching the doctrine of faith as a way of escape. But I came out of the army and went back to Oxford with the conviction that a philosophy is more important—because of more practical use—than a religion. A religion is for the defeated. A philosophy is the negation of defeat."

They came along the narrow Via Sistina into the *piazza* before the beautiful old yellow church of the Trinità de' Monte with its twin towers and its mellow façade looking out over the city; the pagan obelisk erected in the centre of the *piazza* by the Emperor

Hadrian to honour the beautiful young Grecian boy he loved was like an index finger that pointed beauty to the stars; beyond stretched the terraced gardens of the Pincio with their hanging tapestry of ilex trees above the circular basin of the fountain; below the low parapet Rome lay, girdled by her low hills, her domes and towers etched softly against the dim drop-scene of the dim light, brooding, mystic, sentient, waiting for the moon.

Gilbert and Stemway sat on the wall above the great curving flight of steps that give down to the Piazza d'Espagna and the fountain attributed to Cellini, and before which, by day, on the pavement at the foot of the steps, the flower-sellers range their stalls under their striped sun-umbrellas.

"To my mind," Stemway remarked, "this is the most romantic part of Rome—more romantic than all the ruins of imperial palaces and pagan temples—there's where Keats lived, and Shelley, in the orange house at the bottom of the steps, and across the road where Byron lodged—but all the visitors to Shelley's house care about is seeing his heart in pickle—and then they take a tram out to the Protestant cemetery to see his and Keat's graves, and the sentimental ones, or those that are 'fond of poetry' leave a bunch of violets. It's nice to say you've done that, they say. I don't know why they don't just say they've done it and save themselves the trouble and tram fare. I don't know why most of 'em ever come to Rome at all—it doesn't mean anything to them. They go on conducted tours through the Forum, and they gaze vacantly at broken pillars and heaps of stones, and the guide spills a lot of inaccurate stuff to them, and they get themselves snapped in what they like to think is the exact spot where Mark Antony made his oration, or some stout matron or withered spinster drapes herself coyly at the foot of a vestal virgin, and after all that they post some postcards and go and take a look at the cats in the Trajan Forum and imagine that it's some kind of Italian cat-breeding establishment, or that the place just naturally breeds cats, but Rome; the real Rome, is esoteric, not for conducted tours and pension ladies of both sexes. I hate 'em as much when they gush all over the place and say they simply love Rome, it's so interesting, s'ever ser nice, as much as when they don't see anything in it, only a lot of ruins."

He broke off, laughing. "You shouldn't let me flow on like this, you know. It's a bad habit of mine, feeling strongly about things. I make everything spiritually important if I care at all—my beliefs—my friendships. I've never been able to sustain a friendship—I give, terrifically, and destroy myself because the other person doesn't give as much. One oughtn't to demand anything—but one wants so much out of life—full measure and running over. And now, working upon your young friend's principle of giving the association of ideas full play, let us go down to the Café Greco and drink hot rum. All the best people for generations have been talking about themselves at the Café Greco."

A strange, restless, passionate personality this of Nicholas Stemway, yearning to live, 'ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever,' yet unable to acquire the art of being ecstatic about merely being; always trying to suck more juice out of the orange of life than is contained in it—and getting a bitter taste of pith and rind in his mouth instead of the coveted sweetness; always seeing more in people than there is—including Gilbert Stroud.

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ENTENTE UN-CORDIALE

THAT streak of cruelty frequently found in imaginative, sensitive natures, a little warped and twisted by disillusion and despair, and the general ruthlessness of life, caused Stemway to bait Raymore mercilessly.

Gilbert could never be sure whether Raymore was a chronic exhibitionist who enjoyed the consciousness of his extraordinariness, and, so long as he was causing a sensation, focussing interest upon himself, did not mind whether people sneered or were amused, whether they found him funny or ridiculous; or whether he was genuinely naive. Gilbert rather inclined to the exhibitionist theory, which would also account for his bangles and his mode of attire.

To which suggestion Stemway replied briefly, "What rot! The creature is completely gaga. The other night when you went upstairs for your book he came and sat next to me on the settee in the mausoleum and confided that he simply adored *Alice in Wonderland*, and did I know that *delicious* thing the Lobster Quadrille."

"It is rather funny, you know," Gilbert suggested.

"But not as funny as all that. The creature got quite excited about it—told me all about the Mad Hatter's tea-party, and Alice through the looking-glass, got all girlish and had a fit of the giggles and very nearly had hysterics. I felt like giving him a kick up the pants."

"I like him," Gilbert insisted. "Let us take him along to the Café Greco with us to-night—he came back to Rome specially to be with me, and I am deserting him shamefully every evening."

"Doesn't he have enough of his beautiful boy-friend during the day? But all right, bring him along; he'll provide the comic relief, anyhow. But remember, you brought it on yourself—or rather on Raymore. He's for it if he comes."

Raymore was manifestly delighted at being asked to join Gilbert and Stemway, and Gilbert was pleased that Stemway had raised no objections. Raymore was rather on his conscience; he was always glad to go about with him during the day when Stemway was not available, but always left him to his own devices after dinner. He always meant to suggest to Stemway that they should

occasionally invite Raymore, but Stemway always made it so obvious that the American was not wanted, and it was somehow taken for granted that they should go off together. Actually he realised, after that first occasion when Raymore was invited, he did him a greater kindness by not inviting him. Stemway's infinite capacity for inflicting mental cruelty shocked him.

It was somehow dreadful to see Stemway sitting back in his chair with his eyes mere slits in his white face, his mouth more suggestive of a baring of fangs than a smile, the dark lock of hair falling over his brow, his body taut with a suggestion of every nerve keyed to a concert pitch of concentration, and Raymore floundering helplessly in his clutches. He would watch Stemway playing with Raymore's strange mind like a cat playing with a mouse, with the sure knowledge that Stemway would certainly devour him in the end.

He would lead Raymore on to tell his interminable, pointless stories, and when he had finally petered out into the vagueness that was the end of all his anecdotes, Stemway would say, "And so? Go on," knowing perfectly well that there was no 'And so,' that Raymore's mind had long ago delivered itself of the story, and that it was as usual still-born. And then Raymore would flush and fidget and flounder until Gilbert would come to his rescue by changing the subject, at which Stemway would kick him savagely under the table for spoiling the sport.

That evening when they all three went to the Café Greco Raymore was pouring out coffee. Some grounds came through, and he remarked, "There ought to be a strainer—so unpleasant, I think, things like grounds or tea-leaves." It was one of the most coherent sentences he had yet formed, and Gilbert mentally congratulated him, but a moment later he looked up with a bright smile and added, "Mother has tea leaves."

Stemway looked at Gilbert, his eyes darting with amusement. "Charming, I think, don't you, Stroud?" He turned to Raymore and said gently, "Do tell us, what else has mother besides tea leaves?"

Raymore blushed and looked appealingly at Gilbert. "Am I being naive again?"

Gilbert had once told him in a fit of irritation that he was

like a naive girl. But before Gilbert could save the situation, and Raymore with it, Stemway had swooped down on his quarry.

"Yes, yes; but don't stop; *naïveté* is your chief charm; you should cherish it as the wise virgins cherish their maidenhood. Tell us more—Stroud and I hang upon your every word. Don't we—Mercury?"

Gilbert kicked Stemway under the table—and received a more violent kick in return.

Raymore giggled nervously. "I was going to tell you at dinner, but I forgot. At the pension where I stayed in Naples there was a lady who had had three husbands and four children——"

"I call that tactless," Stemway interposed, "so much more discreet to have had three children and four husbands. However, what about her?"

"It was most amusing. She was travelling with her eldest ughter, whom she always referred to as 'my poor child'—she would never go anywhere without 'my poor child.' 'Have you seen my poor child,' she would say. It was most amusing." He laughed, looking at Gilbert for support.

Stemway blew out a cloud of cigarette smoke, his head tilted back. "What happened?"

"Oh, she went away, in time."

"In time for what?"

"I mean, she just went away, that was all."

"I see, just faded away. Well, go on. But if you tell the story about the man who got locked in the cathedral at Seville again I'll murder you. Tell us about Dorothy. Stroud hasn't heard about Dorothy."

"Dorothy?" Gilbert looked at Raymore with interest. "Your sister?" Apart from a possible aunt or cousin it would seem to be the most likely relationship.

"No, she's just someone I met in Pisa when I was coming down here before. She's coming here."

"What a relief for all of us," Stemway commented, gazing at the Regency panel of the old Campanile of Venice on the opposite wall.

"When I was in Venice," Raymore pursued, following the direction of Stemway's eyes, "there was a German woman with

red hair. She used to buy me little cakes. I think she wanted to poison me."

"Quite likely," said Stemway. "Let's go."

He and Gilbert rose, leaving Raymore to pay the bill.

It was pouring with rain when they came out. "Go and find a *carozzia*, there's a good chap," Stemway said to Raymore, and Raymore obediently darted out into the deluge.

"That's got rid of him," Stemway remarked casually, turning up his coat collar. "Come on—we can get a taxi at the end of the street. There's a place at the back of the Trajan Forum I want to take you to—a cellar under cellar, and a guitarist who's an artist at his job."

But at the bottom of the Spanish steps Raymore dashed forward excitedly.

"I've got a cab," he cried. "This way."

"Oh, you shouldn't have bothered," Stemway drawled as he climbed in. "Tell him to take us to the Vennte Settembre."

Raymore instructed the driver, then climbed in beside Gilbert and Stemway and proceeded to tell a long story about how he had to run about to find the cab, and how he had practically had to wrest it from the hands of two English ladies who seemed to think they had a prior right to it, and when he had been talking for about ten minutes Stemway looked at Gilbert and yawned.

"Whatever is the infant raving about?" he demanded, and then, "It's a terribly unsanitary horse, don't you think? I don't think we'll go any farther in this *carozzia*. Poke the fellow in the back, Raymore, and tell him we're getting out here."

When they had all climbed out, the driver was still in argument with Raymore. He had understood he was to take the *signori* to the Vennte Settembre; this was not the Vennte Settembre, and he could have had a fare right out to the Cirio Menotti at the other side of the river; he therefore demanded his full fare. . . .

Raymore floundered with his inadequate Italian and tried to explain that the *signori* had changed their minds.

Stemway chuckled and seized Gilbert's arm. "Let's leave him to it! Here's Garguilo's; let's dive in here and have another rum and coffee and listen to some mushy Italian opera."

"But Raymore," Gilbert protested.

"Oh, come *on*," said Stemway, irritably.

Gilbert followed him through glass swing doors into a warm flood of light and a burst of Pagliacci.

He persisted, when they had found a seat in a corner, under an alabaster statue of a draped female figure chastely enclosed in tubed palms, "It seems a rotten shame about Raymore—going off and leaving him to pay like that—and he got so wet looking for the beastly cab, and he'll never find us."

"I sincerely hope not."

"But it's a dirty trick. We invited him to come with us this evening."

Stemway frowned. He said, "There are times, Stroud, when you make me quite sick."

He sulked until the band broke into *Tosca*, and then suddenly he looked up with that curious half-shy, half-mocking smile which could wipe all the bitterness and cruelty from his face, and was part of his charm. "Did you ever hear anything so sweet? It's like our little infantilist."

APPASSIONATA

BECAUSE of Stemway, Gilbert lingered on in Rome—and Raymore lingered because of Gilbert.

"I mean," he said, trying to establish that confidential atmosphere conducive to explanations and heart-to-heart talks, "it's not often one finds a friend one can talk to."

And Gilbert would be ashamed because the question of friendship in the real sense of the term—as the American understood it, with intimacy of thought and understanding as its prime content—did not enter into his association with Raymore. He tolerated him because he was someone to talk to and go about with when Stemway was not available. He gave him nothing, and there were occasions when he found himself aiding and abetting Stemway in his game of what he called exhibitionist baiting.

Raymore suggested that they should go out to Tivoli one day, and Gilbert agreed. But when he told Stemway the latter frowned.

"Good lord, how some people do squander themselves! Tivoli isn't a place to go to with just anyone. It's even more esoteric than Rome. Leave it until Sunday and we'll go together."

To Raymore, therefore, Gilbert said, "I don't think I'm keen on Tivoli—let's go to Frascati instead," and Raymore, who did not seem to mind where he went so long as he was with Gilbert, was quite happy about it. Gilbert saw no point in hurting Raymore's feelings by letting him know that he was planning to go to Tivoli with Stemway on Sunday.

Stemway said, "Well, did you get out of your Tivoli arrangements with our little friend?"

Gilbert replied, "Oh, I just told him I wasn't keen, so we're going to Frascati to-morrow instead."

Stemway made no remark, but at dinner that night, when Raymore was present, he said, "Oh, by the way, Stroud, I forgot to tell you, I find there's a tram for Tivoli all right on Sunday, so we'll get an early start."

Gilbert looked as uncomfortable as Raymore. He said to Stemway afterwards, "I wish you hadn't let Raymore know about Tivoli—there's no sense in hurting people unnecessarily."

But Stemway merely looked at him out of narrowed eyes and

said, "I feel my friendships very deeply, as I told you, and I resent any intrusion on them."

It was the only time he ever vouchsafed to Gilbert a glimpse of the blend of flame and sword that could make his emotional reactions such destroying affairs, endowing them with a spiritual importance out of all proportion to their actual value.

That Stemway should be even in the slightest degree jealous of Raymore shocked Gilbert profoundly; it seemed to him ludicrous. But he had yet to discover the intensity of emotion that Stemway brought to bear on all his attitudes to life. His whole life was keyed at concert pitch; he did not so much live by an invisible sun within him as burn by it; he destroyed himself by the sheer white-heat of his reactions. Gilbert did not realise this until long after. Certainly not in Rome.

But in Rome he was happier than he had ever been in his life; happier than in his London and East Coast days with Mary Thane. It was as though he was caught by a spark from the flame that consumed Stemway himself, and he learned something that all his life Stemway was never able to acquire, the fine art of living ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever. It was in Rome, in his association with Nicholas Stemway, that he learned the meaning of that. It was as though he had no past and no future.

It seemed to him incredible that he should ever have lain beside a shell-hole in No Man's Land and debated with himself whether he should use his revolver or 'go through with it.' It was all like something he had dreamed, utterly remote and unreal. His father wrote to him that he was coming to London later in the year and would look to him for his active co-operation in the launching of the new subsidiary company, the combined passenger and cargo service, "Stroud's Tours, Ltd." Then Gilbert reminded himself that these Roman days could not continue indefinitely, that presently the outside world must claim him, close about him, draw him back into its seething midst. But it was merely like telling himself that one day he too must die. Nothing seemed real to him but the present; Rome was real, and Stemway, and their walks and talks together, and Raymore with his inconsequent chatter. Even Mary Thane was a shadowy figure wavering in ever-deepening mists of old, forgotten, far-off things. He no

longer had need of her; his friendship with Stemway filled his life with a curious sense of completeness.

One day, he knew, he must come to grips with realities; carry on the Stroud traditions of ships and men, power and success; one day he must take up again that laid-aside dream, pluck perfection in woman-form, and take his place in the world of affairs; one day—but not yet. He had the feeling that presently destiny, or the blind god of chance, or whatever it is, would take things into its own hands and arrange his life for him; he wanted it like that; it relieved him of the too-great responsibility. He told himself that having decided beside that shell-hole in No Man's Land whether or not he would go on living, he had decided enough; Fate or destiny or whatever one liked to call it must do the rest. . . .

Was he not, anyhow, he asked himself, following out some set geometrical pattern? If one did not accept life as a geometrical pattern, or a mathematical proposition, then everything was chaos and confusion, and there was no meaning to anything; everything became a jumble of loose ends that did not make any particular pattern. Once he had been prepared to believe that; now, because of the strangeness of the manner in which Stemway had been drawn into his life, the two of them following the same lines until at last they came face to face in Rome, he must believe in some hidden meaning, see life as sequences of events, interwoven, interdependent, each to-morrow spun upon the loom of to-day. It was, he thought, like one of those plots in fiction from which you cannot eliminate any single incident and say that it can be dispensed with; the whole thing interlocking like a jig-saw puzzle—every part, however odd or undecipherable, belonged, and was intelligent, because it was in its allotted place intelligible. Sometimes he wanted to cry out to Stemway, "Sometimes thou seemest, not as thyself alone, but as the meaning of all things that are." But terrific inhibitions and reserves pressed down upon him because of the reserves with which Stemway himself elected to keep the flame of his spirit hidden.

But it was impossible for him not to believe that Stemway was inextricably interwoven in the fabric of his life; where he was concerned you could almost hear the hum of the immense revolving

wheel that spun out the stuff of destiny. It was not anything as superstitious and unscientific as fatalism, but a metaphysical recognition of the law of cause and effect governing life. By comparison, Mary Thane became a mere minor accident, part of the jig-saw puzzle, but not of episodic importance; there were big segments and small, and she was one of the smaller ones, of less importance than the piece that was Philip Raymore. For that was an important piece! Was it not destiny itself with a guide-book in one hand and a camera in the other that had descended upon him that afternoon when he sat on a sun-warmed wall in Fiesole? A small part of the puzzle, but tremendously important, like one of those odd bits you fit in and having done so instantly perceive where the others should go. Through Raymore he had come at last face to face with Stemway; was the link less important than the pieces it held together?

That day when beside the shell-hole he had chosen life, he had chosen Stem. Their lives had interlocked from that moment. He had chosen, unconsciously, that afternoon in Oxford, that day in Marseilles; this long lotus-eating in the city men call eternal, where the weeds run riot over the ruins of imperial palaces and the wind-flowers blow as they blew two thousand years ago by the portals of pagan temples. . . .

Rome entered his imagination to a degree he had not imagined possible with any city. That a personality should enslave one's imagination was understandable, but he had not known that it was possible for a city so to take hold of one. All his life he remembered those Roman nights, the cedar in the gardens of the Barberini Palace reaching black arms out over the street of the four fountains, the incredible blazes of stars that made a spangled canopy above the city huddled in the embrace of the hills; the white miracle of Rome bathed in moonlight when one looked down on it from the Pincio terraces, or, crossing the city, looked back from the Janiculum. Those white Roman nights, and Stem at his side, and that perfect sense of communion that flowed between them, endowing every moment with that sense of utter completeness.

And the *festa* quality of those Roman days, with flags flying and fountains leaping in the sun, and the massed flowers at the street corners and banked at the foot of the old yellow Spanish

steps, coral branches of blossom, plumes of mimosa, wine and purple of anemones, alabaster sweetness of tuberose; those noons, when the sunshine was like yellow lamplight and the palms of the Piazza d'Espagna seemed weighed down with the atmosphere of siesta. And the deep green shade of the Villa Borghese gardens, with the balloon woman by the gate, in the shadow of the old Roman wall, and the exhilarating quality of those mornings riding in the loose flying turf track, the sun upon one's face like a caress; the lazy strolling round afterwards to the verandahed café on the Pincio, where one might sit and sip one's *apéritif*, looking out over the city, shimmering in its thin blue heat-haze; the cool drip of the fountain under the dark canopy of the ilex trees through which one saw the city framed, so that it was like looking from a dark cool room through a window that gave on to a sun-bright vista; and the gardens of the Pincio, full of flowers and statues and children, and little gay kiosks, reminding one of Paris and the gardens of the Luxembourg; and the idlers lounging on the terrace wall, gossiping and gazing down in to the Piazza de Popolo with its twin churches on its opposite corners, and its fountains, and its trams circling like a merry-go-round, and the café on the corner with the yellow awning and yellow cloths on the little tables set out on the pavement. . . . The clatter of the traffic in the Via Sistina, one side dazzling with sunlight, the other dark with shade, and ahead, across the Piazza Barberini, the hill of the Via Quattro Fontane, with the gently lifting banners of the overhanging cedar, and a blaze of almond blossom at the corner of the *piazza* as you mounted to it. . . .

And the rare quality of those evenings when all the light of the world seemed drained up into the sky, and the mellow façades of the old church and the Spanish steps were turned to burnished gold, the dome of St. Peter's touched with fire from the curtain of flame the sunset stretched behind it; and the blue dusk that crept somehow out of the earth and lay like a gauze upon trees and buildings, and a tender sadness held the city. Those sunsets from the terraces of the Pincio, with the nuns in the old church singing their Ave Marias with a sweetness that could break the heart for beauty and wipe the cynicism from the world like bitter tears from a tired face. . . . Those sunsets that came in with a sound of bells and a turn-

ing of the world to gold. . . . All his life Gilbert remembered. And Stemway's voice, low, vibrant, and Stemway's hand upon his arm.

"My God, Stroud, it was worth struggling through everything to come out and find this on the other side!"

And Gilbert keeping silence because there was no need of speech, since that thought, too, was registered in his own heart.

And those Sunday mornings on the Palatine, climbing up through the warm sweet-smelling grass and riot of flowering weeds, away from the tourists and the organised parties laboriously 'doing' the Forum with the aid of the inevitable guide and seeing only those things which are officially tabulated 'sights'—climbing up through the flowers and grass and shrubs with Stemway and coming out on the top to look out across the vast sweep of the Campagna, rolling away to the snow-capped Sabines, to Frascati, as sweet and golden as its wine, to Tivoli, whose very name is music. . . . Tivoli perched incredibly on its crag above the waterfalls, like something out of mystic Xanadu; Tivoli of the pagan temple that existed before the Galilean peasant came with a new creed; Tivoli from whose heights above the grey olive terraces one looks back and sees the dome of St. Peter's far away across the great plain, like the sail of a ship upon the horizon, far out across an empty sea. . . . And the Villa d'Este, with its cypresses and its fountains like something in a dream. . . .

And the tramping home in the white dust of the Appian Way, and the being overtaken by the lambent sunset and the creeping dusk, and the looking back at the cross-roads to see the lights of Frascati glittering like the jewels in a brooch laid upon black velvet. . . . The coming at last to the great gates of Rome, the clangour of the trams, the tide of pedestrian traffic in the narrow streets, torrents of light flowing at the bottom of the chasms formed by the tall old houses; the turmoil of the Corso, and the tingling relaxation of tired feet and aching bodies at a café under the arcade on the Piazza Colonna. That sense of being drunk with beauty. . . .

And all of it linked up with Stemway's nervous, restless movements, his alternately amused or cynical eyes, his alternately charming or bitter smile; the vibrant intonations of his voice, that gesture of tossing back the lock of hair from his brow, that suggestion of

being always keyed up for some surprise onslaught of ecstasy or torment. That sense of being absorbed into the flame-like texture of that passionate personality.

Everywhere they went people turned and looked at Stemway. They did not know what it was that attracted their attention; partly it was his appearance, tall, gaunt, sardonic, with that white face, smouldering eyes, dark lock of hair, tense body; partly it was something that emanated from him; that quality of a vibrant, highly sensitised personality, both tortured and dominating. In a crowd he arrested attention by that felt, yet unrecognised, reflection of that furnace within him, and into which he plunged all his thoughts and emotional reactions so that he lived always at white heat.

Gilbert could not have defined his attitude towards Stemway. His reaction might be said to be purely impressionistic. There was that vivid impression of Stemway tense with revolt and defiance in the prison camp; Stemway sombre and brooding gliding down the backwater at Oxford on an autumn afternoon; the glimpse of Stemway across the crowded *place* at Marseilles; Stemway leaning back in his chair with half-closed eyes and sneering mouth baiting Raymore; Stemway tall and arrogant and impatient in a crowd, out-topping them queerly, not merely in physique but by that indefinable electric quality which emanated from him; Stemway with his dark soul looking out from the white window of his face, the lighted windows of his eyes; Stemway of the curious half-shy smile; Stemway of the bitter blazing passion. There was this impressionistic emotionalism, this emotional impressionism, and there was that sense of destiny and inevitability, and Stemway as an integral part of the fatalistic design, inescapably in his life, ineradicably in his imagination, and the two things interdependent. Had anyone asked him whether he liked Stemway the question would have seemed curiously ridiculous and unanswerable, like asking if he liked breathing. There was, too, almost as indefinable yet as profound, that sense of kinship, of invisible links, of being of the same *genre*, of a communion below the surfaces of consciousness. He was drawn to Nicholas Stemway as he had never been so drawn to anyone, not even Mary Thane; with her he had a sense of peace, but never this sense of belonging, of that complete affinity beyond all analysis.

ATMOSPHERICS

RAYMORE'S 'Dorothy' arrived in Rome. Almost it might be said she descended upon Rome, for there was no preliminary postcard, wire, or any other intimation of her coming. Raymore and Gilbert, returning from a stroll one noontide and coming hungry into the dining-room, found her established at their table wallowing in macaroni. Raymore was manifestly enchanted to see her. She was a large florid flaxen spinster of uncertain age and a devastating girlishness.

Stemway's comment after he had met her at dinner that evening was, "Guaranteed virgin throughout and afflicted by that forty feeling."

She constantly referred to Raymore, Stemway and Gilbert as 'you boys,' and there was a terrible and terrifying suggestion of 'we young people.'

"Where on earth did you find her?" Stemway demanded of Raymore one evening at the Café Greco. "What do you want with her? Is she more than a mother to you? What does she do in the world? Read good books and keep pet tortoises?"

And then for the first time Gilbert saw Raymore refusing to be snubbed by Stemway.

"I've already told you I met her at Pisa, and she is an extremely intelligent woman and my best friend. She has written books on anthropology. You know that research party that excavated under the Thames recently for Roman relics? Well, she was in that, the only woman member of the outfit."

"I didn't know, but I quite believe it. What is she going to do in Rome? Grub under the Tiber for Etruscan coins?"

He turned to Gilbert, grinning. "I call that romance, Stroud, I do really—an anthropologist leaning negligently against the tower of Pisa waiting to be collected by a guide to good literature. Do your little pamphlets guide one to the works of your anthropologist, Raymore? And if Gilbert and I wrote a book between us or apiece, would you guide people to us?"

Raymore flushed hotly and his hands clenched. Gilbert saw that he was trembling.

"The whole time I've been here you've done nothing but be

funny at my expense," he almost shouted. "And who are you, anyhow? It's always the people that have never done anything much and are never likely to who think they can be funny about those that have!"

Gilbert saw Stemway's eyes half close to mere slits, glittering like knives, and his lips curl back, baring his teeth in that smile that had no laughter in it.

"If, by doing something, you mean writing books on anthropology, or pamphlets on how to enjoy good books," he drawled, "no, my little friend, I haven't done anything—thank God!"

"And what do you know about good books or about anthropology, or about anything?" Raymore demanded, a note of rising hysteria in his voice. His flush had died down and left him curiously white. The waiter, yawning before the Regency panel of the old Venetian Campanile, suddenly ceased yawning and watched the three of them with an eager Latin interest that made no attempt to disguise itself.

"Before you tacked on——" Raymore was continuing, but Stemway cut in.

"Tacked on? Really, dear boy, your expressions——"

"Tacked on, I said," Raymore went on furiously. "Tacked yourself on to Stroud and me and spoiled everything; he was my friend before you got hold of him, and now——now——" His voice shook so markedly that he could not go on. Gilbert was afraid he might burst into tears.

He said, uncomfortably, "Oh, chuck it, Raymore; we're still friends; you're creating a situation."

"I'm not creating a situation, Stroud, and you know it. Stemway's got a sort of hold on you—he had from the beginning; because you were both in the war. . . . But that doesn't give him the right to sneer at everybody and everything."

"Shut up," said Stemway laconically. "We are not amused, are we, Stroud?"

"Bored to death," Gilbert agreed. "Let's have something to drink. What will you have, Raymore?"

But Raymore was neither to be shut up nor placated; he was now thoroughly hysterical, and what Gilbert had intended as tact

had been for him the last straw, Gilbert's tacit alliance with Stemway.

"I won't shut up and I won't have a drink! I've had my last drink with the pair of you! I won't stay here to be insulted and have my friends insulted. I altered my plans to come back to Rome with you, Stroud, and you were glad enough of my company in Florence, but the moment you met Stemway you—you——"

"Chuck me aside like an old glove I believe is the correct simile," Stemway drawled. "But do go on. Stroud and I are going to have a drink, even if you won't. *Cameriere!*"

The waiter carefully avoided Stemway's eye and developed stone deafness. He did not want the little scene to be interrupted. The young *signori* had the rest of the night in which to order drinks.

"You can sneer, Stemway," Raymore stormed on, quite beside himself. "But what is the good of your friendship to anyone? Everyone in Rome knows what you are!"

"Really? That's interesting. Do tell me—or don't you feel you know me well enough?"

"Oh, chuck it," Gilbert muttered, and tried to attract the waiter's attention.

Stemway turned to him. "Don't fuss about the waiter, Stroud, we are on the brink of learning something really vital—what all Rome knows about Nicholas Stemway. Ah, wot?"

"Do you want Stroud to hear? But perhaps it doesn't matter. Perhaps you've corrupted him already."

Stemway chuckled delightedly. "Charming idea! Sounds most vicious."

But Gilbert sprang up. "For God's sake, Stemway, let's clear out—I've had enough of this!"

"Oh, you needn't go," Raymore flamed, "I'm going—I won't intrude. I'll leave you to your precious friend—since you seem to have a taste for—perverts!"

He pushed back his chair so violently as he rose that it fell with a crash to the floor. The delighted waiter leapt forward to retrieve it and Raymore rushed blindly out through the swing-door.

Gilbert sat down with an air of profound relief and mopped his forehead.

"Pervert, I says, and swep' out," Stemway remarked, lighting a cigarette. "Bless his little heart! Exhibitionist to the last! Bit of a projectionist, too, if you ask me. I liked his dramatic exit, though. What I should call a gesture. Where the devil has that waiter gone off to? *Cameriere*, you son of joy!"

The waiter came forward, thoughtfully picking his teeth. Stemway ordered rum-punch.

He said, "I feel, you know, that we've seen the last of little Philip. I must say I shall miss his childish prattle. But in any case I've got to leave that pension. I was going to tell you, only Raymore didn't give me a chance."

"Here's our rum-punch. What's the trouble at the pension, then?"

"Oh, I don't know. All this Finn business—and coming down to dinner in red slippers. They don't like it. It's not done in the best pensions. I think Auntie Pushface from Calcutta complained to the *governante*. I don't think in her heart of hearts she likes Finns. And all that talk about the Vatican and fig leaves, you know. Only Raymore started that."

"But it was you who suggested that they ought to put fig leaves on the female statues, too. I saw her looking at you. It was the night you wore that ghastly pullover."

"It's a very good pullover—or it was once. It's only a bit dirty and in want of repair. I bet Auntie Pushface never had a pullover in her life like that."

"Don't be an ass, Stem. You know it's filthy beyond belief, and like nothing on earth now, whatever it may have been in the beginning."

"But half the people in that pension are like nothing on earth, and no one complains to the management or tells them to quit. But I'm fed up with the place, anyhow—except that I rather like my room."

Gilbert laughed. "It's an utterly awful room, and you know it."

"It isn't, and I don't."

"It's got red walls and revolting furniture."

"I like it. Baroque. And the view over the gardens of the palace—gorgeous at night, only I never seem to be there. But if I must leave, I'd like a flat the other side of the river—this is too

far away from the office. There are quantities of buildings going up over there. Let's have a flat together."

"That would be fun, but I'm not going to stop in Rome indefinitely, you know. I'm idling disgracefully as it is. I'm supposed to be seeing Europe, improving my mind, finishing my education, getting over the war, settling down, getting ready to join my father in England and become a successful business man."

"You *have* a lot to do, haven't you? Why don't you cut the itinerary and settle in Rome—I could wangle you a distinguished job at the institute or the embassy."

Gilbert started. "But I don't want a job—in that sense. There's the Stroud business—when one is a Stroud one automatically goes into the business."

"Why?"

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? Family traditions and all that. When my father dies I have to carry on—and my son, and his son, and so on."

"I see." There was a curious inflection in Stemway's voice. Gilbert looked at him sharply.

"What is it? Does it bore you, this idea of family and tradition and all that?"

"It does rather. I'm sorry for you. I thought the war had killed all that."

"What do you mean?" A slight flush had crept into Gilbert's face. He was a little resentful.

Stemway sat huddled, his head sunk between his shoulders, and looked thoughtfully at the glass, turning it in his fingers, his arm outstretched across the table.

"It must be a fearful strain having a family so old, and with such sacred traditions—doesn't give one a chance in life. The tyranny of tradition." He straightened himself suddenly and his smile flashed out. "Shall we go? The atmosphere of this place is altogether too controversial and subversive to-night, somehow."

When they came out, the long narrow street was black on one side and silver with moonlight on the other; the Trinita de' Monte was white and unreal as a dream above its moon-bathed steps, and the sky like a mist-blue drop-scene behind it.

"It's a gorgeous night," Gilbert suggested, "let's go for a stroll."

Stemway shook his head. "I'm not in the mood. Damn Raymore!"

"What has Raymore got to do with it?"

"Everything!"

They crossed the Via del Babuino in silence and mounted the Spanish steps. At the top they paused and leaned on the wall and looked back at Rome below them, white with moonlight.

"You'll remember this some day," Stemway said. There was a curious savage intensity in his voice. "Perhaps you'll wish to God you were back here—I like to think you will."

Gilbert looked at him, but Stemway's face was set and masked.

He asked with a touch of irritation, "What on earth's the matter with you to-night, Stem?"

Stemway turned abruptly and proceeded to stride across the *piazza* without answering. They walked down the Sistina and as far as the Piazza Berberini in silence. The fountain's thin jet of water was still spouting, a silver thread in the moonlight. Water was flowing as always between the tram-lines, like miniature canals. The streets were deserted. On the edge of the pavement Stemway paused.

"I'll say good night here."

"Why—where are you going?"

"For a walk. *Sera*." He strode off in the direction from which they had just come.

•

XIII

ECLECTICS

I

IN the morning, with the *colazione*, which consisted of a bowl of alleged coffee and a slab of incredibly hard toast, the *cameriere* brought Gilbert a neatly wrapped package.

"*Il signor Raymorio*," he said, laconically.

Removing the folds of white paper, Gilbert discovered a pair of very beautiful tooled leather book-ends, with designs of little nude boys, *sans fig* leaves, in frolic attitudes. There was a note in heavy, untidy writing, thick with asterisks and erasures.

"MY DEAR GILBERT,

Please accept this little gift as a token of remembrance, because I don't suppose we shall ever meet again. I shall be on my way to Venice with my friend Dorothy by the time you get this, and then it is Paris, London, and home. I have only gone abruptly like this because I think it best; I mean that by staying I am only intruding on your friendship with S., and I realise that you have much more in common with him than you have with me. . . . I am very grateful to you for your friendship. . . . I know that I have a difficult personality and that I get on most people's nerves frightfully. . . . I have to make them laugh at me because I cannot make them laugh with me . . . and to amuse them is my only chance . . . and then I suppose I am naturally incoherent and obscure in my meanings because of all the conflict and confusion that is going on in me. . . .

Please forgive me for my outburst last night, but I had stood S. as long as I could for your sake, . . . but when he sneered about D., who is the only real friend I have, I couldn't stand it any more. D. is my wife, you see. It was arranged I should join her in Paris, but I was so miserable here because of S. and you that I sent for her to come. . . . I wanted to leave Rome, but I couldn't because of you. . . . You will never know how much I cared. . . .

D. and I hardly ever tell anyone we are married because we know that to people who don't understand it must seem ludicrous, and we are both sensitive. . . . I want to tell you this because it explains things a little. Perhaps I should have told you before. . . .

It's true what I told you about S. I knew the moment I set eyes on him. . . . I thought he had a wild bitter beauty. . . . I wanted to be friends, but he always hated me. . . . Why don't you join D. and me in Venice? D. is wonderful when you get to know her. You can write to us at the Casa Petrarcha.

Yours ever devotedly,

P. R."

Gilbert showed this extraordinary letter to Stemway.

"Isn't it incredible, Stem, that great fat middle-aged woman married to little Raymore?"

Stemway shrugged. "I don't believe a word of it! The whole letter is sheer exhibitionism. Being sensational is the only way he can make any impression, and he knows it. He knows that if he hadn't sprung that on us we should scarcely have noticed that he'd gone from here. He wanted to give us something to talk about—to keep his ghastly little memory green! That woman was registered here as Miss Banks, and she had a room on the top floor and he was on the first floor—the whole thing is too far-fetched. It's a pity he couldn't think of something more feasible. If he'd confessed that he was a woman in disguise and secretly married to the head waiter at the Café Greco, now, I might have believed it. I like the book-ends. Charming of him, I think. Didn't he give you one of his guides to the best books to put between them? And I love the 'wild bitter beauty' bit. I feel quite decadent!"

"You're a cynical devil, Stem."

"There are less interesting things," Stemway returned cheerfully, and added, "I must go now. Call for me at the office at twelve, and we'll go flat-hunting. Try to look as little like an international spy as possible—we have rather a complex about them at the institute just now. One of the secretaries has his room run with invisible electric bells, and a dictaphone arrangement, that records every word that is spoken in the room, disguised as a filing cabinet. We might lunch together, seeing that you're now a widower. *Addio.*"

2

Gilbert and Stemway found their flat, not that day but a week later, at the top of a tall new building on the outskirts of the city. From its balcony one looked out across the city to the Pincio with its dark foam of trees. It had stone floors and English furniture, and the Italian servant who had looked after the English owner of the flat consented to look after the new tenants. She cooked well, and it was undeniable that life at the flat was superior to that of life in a pension, but Gilbert was vaguely restless and uneasy.

He had already been nearly two months in Rome, and there was no excuse for his remaining; lingering in Rome was not "seeing Europe"; it was not contributing anything towards his objective—his entry into the Stroud business; the marriage that he had resolved to make; it was simply an unjustifiable waste of his father's money and his own time. He had nothing to do when Stemway was away at the institute; no one to talk to, no interests; there were days when he felt exhausted with sheer boredom. He rode in the Borghese on fine mornings; when it was wet he mooned about the flat, reading a little, strumming on Stemway's guitar, playing the gramophone, watching the clock for the hands to creep round to noon, when Stemway would come in for lunch.

When Stemway came the whole texture of life changed; interest surged back into the world; he could forget that he was wasting time, because then time ceased to be. But when Stemway went the afternoon would stretch ahead, intolerably long and empty and futile. He knew that he could not go on. He went away for a few days to Naples with a sense of taking time off. He visited the museum and remembered Raymore; conscientiously sent a post-card home from Vesuvius; went out to Pompeii and found the original of Mary's dancing faun and thoughtfully sent her a post-card of it. He loathed Naples and was enchanted with Pompeii. But the sunlit streets that bore upon their stones the marks of the chariot wheels of two thousand years ago were spoiled for him, because Stemway was not there to share the ecstasy of the soft air and the broken beauty that reminded him of Rome.

He found himself ushered into the villa of those brothers who gained immortality by the dubious taste of their mural decorations,

but the real obscenity seemed to him to lie in the titters of the visitors, and still more in the spectacle of the wives who waited without, the sexes having been carefully segregated by the guide. Gilbert loathed the eager expectancy of their eyes; there was something pornographic about it; their manner said so plainly when the men returned, looking a little self-conscious and sheepish. "What was it, dear? What did you see? Was it very awful? Do tell me."

Something flamed in Gilbert Stroud. This monstrous pre-occupation with sex! This inability to accept it Latinly, simply, and go on to other things. The horrible indecency people contrived to make of it. The complacent, sentimental, sensual married men, with their easily roused and as easily satisfied habit-formed appetites; the contented bovine little wives and their pathetic devotion to their 'hubbies'; women who considered twin beds more 'refined.' . . . Good Lord, he thought, fancy being some woman's 'hubby'! He could conceive of himself as married, but never as 'a married man'; loathly to hear oneself referred to as 'my husband,' as one might say 'my umbrella'; yet he could visualise himself referring to 'my wife,' proudly, as one should say, triumphantly, 'my rare and exquisite diamond,' taking upon oneself credit for its ownership. His objective became increasingly clear; he must finish with this tour of Europe, stop playing with life and get down to some sort of achievement; there was this dream of the exquisite woman set like a rare jewel in his life. And the more he saw of other women the more closely he adhered to his dream, the more important it seemed.

Back in Rome he thought about Mary. There were times when he wanted her, intolerably—times when it seemed that almost any woman would do. He was wearying, wearying of this monastic Roman venture, helped out by a sort of passionate spiritual homosexuality. He thought of Mary and their days in the little house between the common and the sea; Mary in the little flat looking on to Sloane Square; Mary at the other side of a restaurant table in the rosy glow of lamplight; Mary slim and light in his arms, dancing; and in his arms, warm and heavy with sleep. He thought of the cool arrogant beauty of the women who walked by day in Bond Street, or drove long sleek luxurious cars, and danced by

night upon floors of ebony or coloured glass, exquisite women, pearl-hung, silken-sheathed, narrow-hipped, exotic as orchids, yet mere shadows of that woman of whom men should whisper enviously, "There goes Gilbert Stroud's wife."

A pageantry of fair women in his mind, a persistent dream which should ultimately crystallise in one woman . . . but he could not talk to Stemway about this vision, this creeping fever in his blood in those long empty Roman afternoons. He would wonder about Stemway in relation to women. But it was as though there existed some tacit understanding between them which made that subject taboo.

3

Gilbert tried once to break the taboo. Stemway was improvising at the piano, and Gilbert was lying on his back on the low divan heaped with cushions and watching that pale intent face. Queer beggar, Stemway, he thought; one lived with him without ever really knowing him, or what went on inside him. Trying to guess at his inner life was like peering in darkness through the windows of an unlighted room; dim forms outlined themselves, shapes suggested themselves, but one could not be sure of anything.

Stemway drifted into *L'Après-midi d'un Faun*, and a smile lit up his face—it was like someone passing through a dark room with a candle, Gilbert thought, a momentary flickering illumination, and then darkness again. It happened at other times. There was the way in which Stemway handled books, as though he loved them, apart from what they contained; the way in which he would run his head over the lines of an Attic relief in the Vatican, and that queer happy smile that would illuminate his face. He would say, with a curious, half-apologetic shyness, "You know, I love these things," as though he were faintly surprised at himself for doing so.

He smiled now at Gilbert. "Remember it as a ballet, Stroud?"

"The Russian ballet doesn't penetrate to darkest Canada. Don't play any more, Stem, I want to talk." There was a suppressed irritation in his voice.

Stemway rose and proceeded to fill his pipe. "What do you want to talk about? Not your soul or anything eighteen-ninetyish like that?"

"No. Women." His tone was vaguely defiant.

"Oh, Lord! Must you?" Stemway pressed the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe.

"It would make a change."

Stemway looked up. "The youth sounds positively bitter."

"I'm not, but—look here, Stem, don't you ever think about women?"

"Not often. They embarrass me. Something always vaguely indecent about them, don't you think? My mother is the only woman who doesn't make me self-conscious. Even when I was a kid at school I used to think she was the most marvellous thing—different—'as in a vision or a dream, some beautiful and foreign lady.' That sort of thing. It's stayed with me. I'd like you to meet her sometime. She's such a grave sweet thing, and intelligent; she doesn't ask you things, so you can talk to her; and she doesn't mind if you don't talk. If women in general were like her one would always have to be on the defensive; but they're not—they—oh, I don't know—that business of feeling that all the time they're speculating as to one's emotional reaction to them. Man-eaters. I don't know——" He broke off and laughed, self-consciously. "It's a funny business altogether."

"What is?" Gilbert was determined to dig down under Stemway's reserves.

"All of it—all this male-and-female-created-he-them business. All rather unpleasant."

He went back to the piano and plunged into a violent Slavonic dance.

Gilbert stared moodily at the ceiling. In a way, of course, he reflected, Stem was right; it was a queer business; disturbing; and one resented the urgency of the forces which made one capitulate to the desires of the man-eaters. But women could be beautiful, too, and then the pursuit and conquest of them might mean something, instead of resolving itself into the pitiful farce of seduction.

Only it was no use trying to talk to Stem about it. Whatever was the dark secret of his life, he decided, there were no women in it. Only perhaps, he thought, subconsciously remembering his stepmother, perhaps far back in his story, forgotten, there had been some woman who had done something to him that could not be

undone, twisted something deep down in him, left a scar somewhere, not the less ineradicable because invisible. But Stem adored his mother. . . . Gilbert Stroud's psychology did not penetrate deep enough to perceive that adoration can be as disastrous as antagonism where the profounder impulses and reactions are concerned.

Stemway, having sublimated his antipathy towards women in the crashing chords of the Slavonic dance, spread his arms out over the piano top and looked at Gilbert.

"I'd like you to come and spend Christmas at my home," he said. "I'll get a fortnight—I'm taking my leave then instead of as summer holidays. We've got rather a jolly little place at Stow-in-the-Wold—not much more than a cottage really—but it's real old grey Tudor stone, with the Cotswolds outside the back door, and a stream at the bottom of the garden where you can bathe before breakfast in the summer and skate in the winter. I'll be going about a week before Christmas, and I've only got to write and say I'm bringing you for them to dash out and order the fatted calf and all that, right away."

Gilbert thought for a moment. He had promised himself Switzerland and the winter sports that should satisfy his nostalgia for Montreal.

He said, "It's awfully decent of you, Stem, and I'd like to come, but couldn't we drop off first at St. Moritz?"

Stemway looked thoughtful. "I couldn't. It will take me all my time to raise my fare to England. Couldn't you come to England with me first and then go on to St. Moritz afterwards, when I'd gone back to Rome? Your time's your own, you see, whereas I'm tied to a schedule."

Gilbert promised to think it over, but he did not take to the idea. He was not at all sure that he would fit into that Cotswold home and that atmosphere of mother-love and mother-worship. She would be kind to him, this mother of Nicholas Stemway, and instinctively he recoiled at the thought. The old panic came over him—he could not explain it; the thing deep down in him to where lay buried the memory of a woman's flashing eyes and the gleam of a knife, and a whirling chaos of pain and panic, impotent rage, and an agony of humiliation and savage, frustrated hostility.

He did not consciously recall this episode of his childhood now; it was not that he had forgotten it, but the effects asserted themselves more frequently than the cause.

Now his consciousness made excuses for him. He told himself that it would be foolish to go to England, passing through Switzerland, as he would be doing, and then to come back; it was a waste of time, a waste of money, a waste of energy, particularly as he wanted to go back to England to spend some time with Mary. In a vague way he resented Stemway, who had held him in Rome long after he had exhausted its interest, and who now wanted to rearrange his Swiss plans. He resented the idea that Stemway had so much power over him; he felt that he owed it to himself to have his own way about St. Moritz. An international playground like St. Moritz, he told himself, might be legitimately included in a seeing-Europe campaign, and from St. Moritz he would go to England—and Mary.

Finally, he told Stemway that he would come to England from St. Moritz and visit Stow-in-the-Wold before Stemway went back to Rome.

Stemway did not press the point. He said, "And you'll come back to Rome in the New Year?"

"I don't know," Gilbert evaded, and then, defensively, "What is there for me here? It's different for you—your job's here."

Stemway made no reply, and the subject was dropped. Gilbert tried not to think ahead. The feeling that he was absorbed into Stemway's life, and Stemway's into his, eliminated all question of there being any parting of the ways after St. Moritz, even though he could not see himself taking up the old threads again in Rome. He liked to think that the issue would shape itself of its own accord. Stemway would perhaps come to England, and the smooth communion that was the essence of their friendship would flow on. In the meantime, one could only live one day at a time, and theirs was still the Palatine, the wide spaces of the Campagna, the friendly narrowness of the streets made dear by association; theirs still the evenings at the Café Greco, and under the arcade of the Piazza Colonna; theirs the lamplight and firelight of the room high up above the city, theirs the great talks and the deep silences, and that sense of nearness and communion flowing between them; that

deceptive sense of timelessness and of inevitable going on forever. . . . Stemway, sitting sunk deep in the low shabby armchair, his long legs stretched out to the fire, his long hands hanging limp over the arms of the chair, his pipe between his teeth, his eyes brooding; or Stemway in a different mood, sitting on the edge of the table, strumming on the guitar and singing the popular nonsense of the time; or Stemway at the piano playing Parsifal, or in yet a different mood improvising upon Stravinsky or out-Satie-ing Satie. Stemway drunk on rum, looking like a satyr and being diabolically clever at the piano; Stemway drunk on beauty, reading *The Hound of Heaven* and looking like a tortured saintly Shelley. . . . Stemway in one of his silent, irritable, go-to-the-devil moods; and Stemway holding forth passionately about first and last things . . . and the war a dark limbo behind them, and the curtains of the past drawn upon it, as one draws curtains upon a winter darkness, and leaves them drawn. Stemway violent in all his beliefs, passionate over all that he cared about, and under all that underlying streak of subversiveness a volcano that erupted when you least expected it. . . .

All his life Gilbert Stroud remembered.

4

During the week before Christmas they travelled together as far as the Swiss frontier. A wave of remorse swept Gilbert, invoked partly by a sense of disloyalty, partly by a real sense of loss.

"I wish you were coming, Stem. Do! I've enough cash for both of us, and you needn't be so beastly proud. You can send your people a wire and say you're coming on later."

Stemway answered sombrely, "You know I can't, Gilbert. It's not just the money, though of course I couldn't let you subsidise me. There's my mother to consider—I couldn't let her down; she counts on having me home for Christmas. Why not alter your plans and come on with me and come back here afterwards?"

Gilbert was utterly stricken. He had already glimpsed the Swiss snows, tasted the first draught of mountain air.

"I can't, Stem, you know I can't! It's all fixed; the hotel and everything. . . ."

"You mean you don't want to." There was no reproach in Stemway's voice, nothing but a despairing acceptance.

"Don't be an ass, Stem, you know it's not that."

Stemway smiled his sudden heart-breaking, boyish smile. "I don't think anyone ever knows anything about anyone else. If you fall into a crevasse it will be poetic justice, anyhow! Come on; get out, and I'll shove your stuff through the window."

On the platform of the frontier station, behind him the hills black with pines on their lower slopes, white with snow where the pines gave way to aridness, Gilbert knew a sense of escape and exhilaration. He had earned this, he told himself exultantly, after all those long smothering Roman afternoons with their atmosphere of interminable siesta, after all that pale Italian winter sunshine, and all that suffocating inactivity.

He looked up at Stemway hanging out of the window, hatless, his hair falling over his forehead.

"I'll send you a postcard to say when I'm coming. *Addio.*"

"I'll sit by the letter-box and wait. *Arrivederci.*"

The great international *rapide* that had torn across Europe from the Roman sunlight to the Swiss snows, drew slowly out. Stemway hung out of the window, waving wildly, but Gilbert had his back to the train the moment the horn shrilled its departure, and was gazing at snowy peaks.

•

SWISS INTERLUDE

I

THIS, Gilbert told himself, exultantly, skimming like a bird over the great sheet of ice flanked by palatial hotels, with the mountains towering behind, was what he had dreamed of in France during the war, and in the long emptinesses of those Roman afternoons. Clean sheets of ice, white mountains; skates, skis; sharp cold air that the lungs drank in gratefully in long deep draughts; never mind the old ladies who came to look on and talk about the scenic beauties of Switzerland, and whose winter sports outfit comprised heavy boots and an alpenstock; never mind the noisy bright young people who sat about and drank cocktails and ploughed up the snow with their overcrowded toboggans; never mind the experts who came to show off; it was all too big to be spoiled; too clean to be contaminated.

It did not matter that one was alone; it was better so; one needed no one, for here one was nothing but a body that exulted in its superb well-being; one had no need to talk or think.

But the Gregsons did not understand this; there were four of them, and they arrived just before Christmas with an enormous outfit which seemed to include every known item of winter sports equipment. The family comprised Major and Mrs. Gregson, and Effie and Marjorie, aged twenty-two and eighteen respectively. They were conspicuously English and devastatingly kind, and they invaded Gilbert's delicious solitude. There had been a son who had been killed in the war. Gilbert might have been sympathetic had not Mrs. Gregson attempted to sublimate her love for her lost son through him. It is not comfortable being the medium for somebody's sublimation of something. He tried very hard not to be callous, but he could not make Bob Gregson matter amongst the memories of the wholesale dead. Bob Gregson, he gathered, had been in the Air Force and crashed during training, and he was the only son. It was the tragedy of the Gregson family—but there were thousands of families who had greater tragedies. Bob Gregson had after all died a clean death, he reflected, remembering the creature whose face had been shot away and who had gibbered to him in No Man's Land to make a run for it. . . .

Mrs. Gregson wanted to mother him. He supposed that it was pathetic, but it set his scar throbbing violently. Why couldn't she leave him alone? She was always calling him a poor boy, and saying that he must be very lonely, but that 'the girls' would be only too pleased to have him with them, and no doubt he could teach them a lot; skating, she meant; she had always heard that Canadians were such wonderful skaters. Gilbert repressed the ribald inclination to add, "On thin ice," and Mrs. Gregson went on to say that he'd find there was 'no nonsense' about her girls; so many girls nowadays were so fast, weren't they, and they expected a young man to become engaged to them just because he'd played a few sets of tennis with them. Did he play tennis? Oh, he should. They had a lovely tennis-court at their house at Streatham. That was near the Crystal Palace, she explained, remembering that he was not an Englishman; he ought to have a look at the Crystal Palace whilst he was in England; one of the sights of London; they had such lovely firework displays. He must come and have some week-ends with them when they all got back to England. And Major Gregson added heartily, "Yes, my boy; we keep open house; Liberty Hall, eh, Ma? Always plenty of young people around. Just as if Bob were there."

Gilbert conceived a violent dislike of the deceased Bob, and he loathed the idea of week-ending at the Streatham Liberty Hall and playing endless sets of lawn-tennis with the girls, about whom all too plainly there was 'no nonsense.' He spent a great deal of precious time avoiding the Gregsons. He would hang about in his room waiting for them to get out of the hotel first, and they in turn would hang about "in case that nice Canadian young man has no one to keep him company, poor boy." And when they were tired of waiting they would all go out together, link hands and go sailing over the ice, and at lunch-time they would tell him that they had waited for him and practically apologise for going off without him. If he tried leaving the hotel first they invariably found him, if they did not waylay him before he ever got outside the hotel.

He had practically decided to leave St. Moritz in favour of some quite unknown winter station, when Bernhardt turned up. Bernhardt came from Berne, and was alone, and the Gregsons eyed him suspiciously. Mrs. Gregson had a fixed idea that any young

man who announced himself as a Swiss must be a German who had the decency to be ashamed of it, and she showed no inclination to mother Bernhardt, in spite of the fact that he was marvellous to look at, with flaxen hair and amazing teeth and eyes like blue ice.

On skates and skis he was the most amazing person Gilbert had ever seen. He overtook Gilbert on a ski-ing slope the day after his arrival.

He asked in English, with only a very faint accent, "Where did you learn to ski?"

Gilbert laughed. "It was what I was wondering about you!"

And thereafter they skied together, and their friendship was in the nature of a mutual admiration society.

Gilbert told Bernhardt of the Gregson persecutions. Bernhardt laughed, and invited him to take refuge at his table in the dining-room; it was at the far end of the room and conveniently near the door, so that they could slip out before the Gregsons had finished.

The first evening at Bernhardt's table he discovered that he was a medical gymnast attached to a sanatorium at Berne. He also discovered that Bernhardt was what can only be defined as ambi-sextrous. He explained that he was considerably incommoded by his appeal to both sexes. He had been studying at the university at Munich before the war, and he had never 'run about' much with women, and a German banker, the father of a fellow-student, had jumped to conclusions because of this and sent him, on his birthday, a box of roses, and crimson ones at that. This would have been amusing had he not sent them to the apartment where he was at the time living with his parents. They arrived at dinner-time, and the servant brought them to the table 'with the compliments of Baron Hoffmann.'

Bernhardt laughed; it had, he explained, really seriously incommoded him, because he had to produce a young woman as his fiancée in order to satisfy his father, and after that he had to leave Munich in order to avoid marriage! Life could be very difficult, could it not? But amusing. Perhaps if it were not difficult it would not be so amusing. He liked it so. He liked life enormously. It was the wildest fun, was it not?

But the world's preoccupation with love bored him. One could make love, surely, without being in love? Animals did not fall

in love with each other. It was artificial and grotesque. To make love, that was amusing; a diversion; but to be in love, ugh, what a solemn business! That surely would not be at all amusing? And Bernhardt would laugh deep down in his throat, as though he contained more laughter than he could ever express; and his eyes laughed, as though his very mind and soul shook with amusement.

But sometimes Bernhardt would be serious—though never for long. In a serious interim he explained to Gilbert that he liked only a few things, but he liked them enormously; ski-ing, skating, Rhine wine, French women, riding, friendships that left one free and did not incommode one, the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec and Marie Laurencin—‘so delightfully perverted,’ he said—and the novels of Anatole France and Marcel Proust. A few things he hated intensely: the music of Johannes Strauss, Italian opera, English spinsters, and men who did not believe in the League of Nations. What women thought did not interest him; they had no business to think; their business was to be made love to, and, when called upon, but only then, to make love. Their ideas even at their best were not good enough. Concerning all things else he was negative. Apart from his specified *bêtes noires* he could tolerate anything so long as it did not incommode him. He believed that the fine art of living lay in giving the ego unrestricted outlet.

“One should live selfishly, of course,” said Bernhardt; “it is the only intelligent way in which to live, is it not? Otherwise one becomes seriously incommoded. But it is very difficult to live quite selfishly; one has such absurd altruistic impulses in spite of oneself.”

Gilbert, who considered this blend of the æsthete and the athlete charming, thought that a gross or two of Bernhardts might be imported into Oxford with advantage. He liked Bernhardt. He did not intrude on one, or, as he himself would have expressed it, incommode one. After dinner, when everyone else in the hotel danced, he and Bernhardt sat together in the lounge and drank Rhine wine and talked about the League of Nations and the importance of thinking internationally. He was very passionate about this. It all followed on from the League of Nations. The mistake we made, he insisted, was in thinking in terms of nations instead of races. It was absurd that the English should have fought the

Germans since they all formed part of the great Saxon race; inherently they must have more in common than the English and the French—the Gauls, an entirely different race. There was no such thing, he contended, as the French mind, the Italian mind, the German mind, the English mind; there was a Gallic, a Latin, a Saxon consciousness; a Semitic consciousness; a negroid consciousness, and so on.

“But when a race becomes scattered——” Gilbert suggested.

“Oh, then,” said Bernhardt vaguely, “then it becomes American.”

2

There were frequent fancy-dress carnivals at the hotel, and Bernhardt and Gilbert were conspicuous because they did not take part in them. The Gregsons felt this very keenly. They did not mind about Bernhardt; he was a ‘foreigner,’ and therefore more or less expected to be ‘queer,’ but Gilbert, decidedly Gilbert, as a member of the great British Empire, should have joined in the fun with the girls.

Major and Mrs. Gregson had brought pierrot costumes with them. One always needed them sooner or later, Mrs. Gregson explained, and pierrot costumes were always in good taste. The girls were more original, though of course in equally good taste. Mrs. Gregson confided that they were going respectively as Sunrise and Sunset; really very charming, she thought, and the Major offered to ‘fix’ Gilbert up as a Sheik; it was quite easy, he explained, with a bath-robe and a striped scarf or two. He offered to lend Gilbert his own bath-robe. Gilbert thanked him, but explained that he had decided not to dress up so that he could keep his Swiss friend company. His Swiss friend did not care for dressing up.

Mrs. Gregson said, “Good gracious, never mind about him. You must come and join in the fun with the girls.”

Gilbert then confessed to ‘not being awfully keen’ on dressing up; it made him feel self-conscious, he explained, whereupon Mrs. Gregson became very tender and kind, and told him not to be a silly boy; he would make a most dashing young sheik, most dashing, and after all, we were all only young once, and look at old fogeys like her and dad—if they could dress up without being self-conscious, surely young people could! And she patted Gilbert’s

arm affectionately and said that that was settled, then, Dad would come round to his room after dinner and fix him up. . . .

Gilbert told Bernhardt, who said that Mrs. Gregson was 'wild fun, poor dear,' and agreed that only the Latin races had the temperament for carnival, and that in any case he had a great aversion to obliterating his own perfectly satisfactory and, he liked to think, charming ego. People should only dress up when they were not satisfied with themselves. No sheik or pirate could possibly be more interesting than Gilbert Stroud and Carl Bernhardt—therefore why dress up? Moreover, for himself, the fantasy life had never held any attraction for him. People only resorted to fantasy when they were not satisfied with reality, and he found reality entirely diverting. And as the entire hotel would be playing with balloons and paper streamers that night, he proposed that he and Gilbert should go skating after dinner; there was going to be a full moon. Gilbert thought that after-dinner skating, with or without a moon, would be a pleasant respite from the League of Nations and autobiographic anecdotes of a pornographic flavour.

When the Major came to his room after dinner, therefore, with the bath-robe and the striped scarves he found only an untenanted dark.

The Gregsons never really forgave Gilbert. Mrs. Gregson went on trying to be kind, but she decided that young Mr. Stroud was really a very difficult young man, and not to be compared with poor Bob. To Gilbert's immense relief there were no more weekend invitations to Streatham.

3

Gilbert and Bernhardt continued to skate and ski together, to sit at cafés in the cold clear sunlight, to talk of a thousand things. Bernhardt was always gay, always amusing, always in terrific form and spirits, and once again Gilbert was completely happy and living in the present with an intensity which eliminated past and future equally.

Stemway wrote from England asking when he was coming. He had less than a week before he must return to Rome.

"There is just as much snow in England now," he wrote, "and if you haven't had enough winter sports already, there are excellent hills for tobogganning, and the stream at the bottom of

the garden is frozen hard enough for skating. Do wire and say you are coming at once."

But Gilbert neither wired nor wrote. He thought he knew that English snow—wet, mushy stuff that turned to muddy slush under your feet, instead of sparkling like diamonds. He thought, too, that he knew that English Christmas that carried on until the new year, that smothering home atmosphere oozing with kindness and goodwill that he was asked to exchange for Bernhardt's gaiety, just as he was asked to exchange the Alps for the Cotswolds, this exhilarating champagne air for the dampness and rawness of the English December.

He did not reply to Stemway because he did not know how to reply. He stayed on at St. Moritz. The great thing, it seemed to him, was to do what one wanted to do in the present, and let the future take care of itself—and it was so seldom one was able to put this philosophy into practice that it seemed a sheer waste of life to go back on it. Bernhardt, to whom Gilbert explained the circumstances and his attitude, thoroughly endorsed this point of view.

"People say that the hardest thing in life is to do what one wants to do, but that is usually because they do not know what they want to do, and if they do know, don't want it enough."

"One tries not to hurt people," Gilbert suggested, thinking of Stemway.

Bernhardt shrugged. "So many people lay themselves open to be hurt. If people insist on lying down flat in the path in which they perceive one wants to walk, it is no one's fault but their own if they get trodden on. People are so stupid; they insist on feeling too deeply, and when there is no need to feel at all. There are only a few things one need feel strongly about—and the most important is the necessity for amusing oneself sufficient unto the day."

Bernhardt's hedonism fitted in admirably with Gilbert's inclinations. Bernhardt intended to remain in St. Moritz for another two weeks, and Gilbert decided that then he too would leave and go to England—and Mary. He would write Stemway from there—by then some adequate excuse for not leaving St. Moritz sooner would have occurred to him. He crushed down a sense of disloyalty that rose up in him when he thought of Stemway by reminding himself that he had stayed on in Rome longer than he had intended because of him.

He continued to enjoy life with Bernhardt, until on New Year's Eve Gabrielle arrived from Paris with her mother. She was a dark slender flame of a thing, and Bernhardt found her enchanting. She was, he said, '*tout-à-fait exquis*.' He abandoned moonlight skating with Gilbert in favour of dancing with her, but Gabrielle smiled upon Gilbert. Gilbert was angry with her because she had spoiled his friendship with Bernhardt, and when it was a choice between Bernhardt's friendship or Gabrielle's passion, he much preferred Bernhardt.

Gabrielle confided to Gilbert that she considered his friend altogether too conceited, too sure of himself. He had been very angry because she had refused to go to his room; he had told her that many women would have been highly flattered by his offer to seduce them, and demanded of her what right she had to refuse, since she had allowed him to kiss her passionately enough to melt all the ice in St. Moritz.

"But I do not want him," said Gabrielle with a shrug and an air of finality. "He is too German. And the Swiss did not help us in the war."

Gilbert did not see what that had to do with it, but the idea of Bernhardt confronted by a woman who refused to be seduced by him amused him.

"Now you, m'sieu, are different," said Mademoiselle. "The English—they are charming—so restrained."

"But restraint in love is surely very dull," Gilbert suggested.

Mademoiselle explained that indeed that was not so; it made for passion. The candour of Mademoiselle Gabrielle's preference for him amused him enormously. Bernhardt found it ironic.

"I want Gabrielle but she does not want me; Gabrielle wants you but you do not want her; therefore Gabrielle comes skating with me because of you, and I because of Gabrielle, and you are the only disinterested party. We have all the passion, Mademoiselle and I, and you have all the amusement. It is a quite new version of the triangle."

Gilbert was not attracted by the French girl, in spite of the fact that in Rome he had fretted against the celibacy which his life with Stemway imposed. Her vanity irritated him and he did not consider her looks remarkable. She was interested in only one

thing—the male reaction to her sex-appeal; it was Bernhardt's lack of humility which aroused her hostility; his directness robbed her of her chief amusement in life, the tantalising of the male. Bernhardt was not prepared to be dandled at the end of a string ready to be drawn up at her pleasure; he was not prepared to accept her as one accepts favours, gratefully; his attitude was one of conferring a favour upon her by desiring her. They were, Gilbert perceived, two of a kind.

He resented her intensely. Until her arrival he and Bernhardt had been happy in each other's society; now all that Bernhardt did was pursue Gabrielle through him, Gilbert, and all she did was pursue Gilbert through Bernhardt. He did not find the threesome at all amusing. It irritated him. It occurred to him that if he went away Gabrielle would surrender to Bernhardt. He would be doing his friend a service; but the thing was by no means pure altruism. St. Moritz alone, or St. Moritz with Bernhardt, were both delightful, but he had no taste for triangles.

Bernhardt did not evince any regret at Gilbert's proposed departure.

He said, "It has been nice, our friendship; it is a pity that a woman should have intruded upon it, but it was a woman, was it not, who spoilt the Garden of Eden for Adam, and women have been spoiling things for men ever since; they cannot therefore complain if we treat them badly." He sighed, "*Cherchez la femme!*"

Gilbert laughed. "Well, good luck with Gabrielle, anyhow."

Bernhardt shrugged. "We shall see. Perhaps after all it does not matter so much—desire is a little like cream, it turns sour with keeping."

"Oh, come, Bernhardt, I thought it was like wine—improved with keeping?"

"It depends upon the vintage, my friend. And even the most rare vintage does not keep beyond a certain time; it reaches the point at which it should be drunk with ecstasy—and if it is not, why, then, it begins to deteriorate, and one does not drink it with much pleasure; indeed, one should not then drink it at all."

At their parting he said, "It is good-bye, now. It is probable we shall not meet again, but I wish you all the luck in the world—all the women you want, when you want them—and not otherwise."

"You're incorrigible, Bernhardt. Besides, I don't want a harem—I want only one woman, but she must be—perfect."

"Oh, but my friend, how dull!"

"I don't mean it like that. A saint would bore me as much as it would you—particularly in feminine form. But she must be exquisite—thoroughbred in every respect."

"It sounds more like a horse than a woman," Bernhardt sighed, "but whatever it is you want I hope you find it—and want it just as much when you've got it, which usually one doesn't. Anyone can dream, and a few realise their dreams, but only the chosen few find as much joy in the realisation as they did in the dreaming. I think the genius lies not so much in making your dreams come true as in making them stay true. Life has an odd way of cheating one."

"You're a cynic, Bernhardt."

"No, something much more intelligent—a sceptic. Any fool who has had a few disappointments can become a cynic—usually he does—but it takes philosophy to become a sceptic. A cynic is a pessimist with a sense of defeat; a sceptic is a pessimist with a sense of humour." He laughed. "Where shall I write to you in England? I would like to send a picture postcard occasionally—every five years, say. Letter-writing is one of life's futilities, like falling in love, but without the compensating amusement."

Gilbert gave him Mary Thane's London address as the most static he could think of. They shook hands, and Bernhardt wound his brilliant scarf round his throat and swinging his skates, strolled off in quest of Gabrielle.

Gilbert looked regretfully at his baggage strapped and labelled for departure. There were after all other places besides St. Moritz, he reflected; it was stupid to be going to England and fog and gloom, when here the sun sparkled on the snow and the air had that tonic quality that derives from mountains; stupid to fly like this before a woman. And yet to go on somewhere else entailed all manner of physical exertions that wearied him merely to contemplate. The easiest thing was to go to England and Mary.

To be driven from one place by a woman, and called to another by a woman. . . . Bernhardt was right, he thought. *Cherchez la femme . . . cherchez la femme. . . .*

THIS MAN AND WOMAN BUSINESS

I

THIS time Gilbert took the precaution of sending Mary a telegram announcing his return to London. He thought of her all the time he was rushing towards her by boat and train. Was it only three months since he had last seen her? It seemed much longer; part of another life. Well, he told himself, it was part of another life; a life in which Stemway had no part. But just then he did not want to think about Stemway; there was still at the back of his mind that vague resentment that Stemway had placed him in a position in which his personal desires had the opportunity to betray friendship and detract from loyalty due. The moment people began to make demands, even if those demands were only implicit in their attitude, they spoiled friendship, he reflected; they placed one in false and intolerable positions, in extricating oneself from which, one's conduct was made to seem discreditable. But he liked to think that actually the discredit was on the other person for creating the situation. Mary never made demands, and there were none implicit in her attitude, and that was what was so comfortable and comforting about her.

London was damp and cheerless, as he had imagined it would be, with a thin yellow fog which caught the lights from shop-windows and blurred them till they were like things seen through tears. He leaned back in the taxi that bore him from the station to Sloane Square and gave himself up to a vision of Mary waiting for him in an atmosphere of glowing warmth and soft lamplight. Partly because it was a wet night, and partly out of his impatience to see her, he did not stop to buy her flowers.

When a maid opened the door to him he had a momentary pang of disappointment. He had somehow visualised Mary herself opening the door. But then, of course, Mary hadn't had a maid when he had visited her before, he reminded himself. The girl showed him into the familiar sitting-room—only somehow it wasn't familiar. It had been summer when he was last in that room, and with the heavy drawn curtains he lost that sense of light and air and space with which he had always associated it in his memories. Simultaneously with this impression he was

aware of several things about Mary; her pallor, the slight untidiness of her hair, the shadows under her eyes, her nicotine-stained fingers, a little grubby, too, from the typewriter, the grey smears of cigarette ash on her dark blue working suit. And it was not as though he had taken her by surprise; she had been expecting him, yet had made no effort at making herself attractive for him.

She held out her hands to him, and her smile was weary.

"I'm so glad you're back, Gilbert. I hadn't time to change and make myself beautiful for you—had a rush job, and been working right up to this minute. I've only got to go through it and correct it and then it's ready for when the messenger calls, and then we can go out and do whatever you like."

He kissed her perfunctorily. "I'm sorry you're so busy. You look terribly tired."

"I am. Tired and dirty and rather sick of things. Sit down and I'll mix you a drink—then I'll just run through that article."

Gilbert was vaguely irritated by this intrusion of Mary's work. He said, "Do you mind if we have some air in here? There's a frightful fudge."

"And a frightful fog outside, but by all means have the fog if you prefer it."

Her voice was listless. He watched her at a side-table selecting bottles. He sank down into an arm-chair beside the fire. "What is the matter with you, Mary? You don't seem awfully thrilled to see me. Don't bother about drinks yet. Come and sit down."

"I can't. I must finish that job. The boy will be here in a minute. Here's your drink."

She brought it to him, pushed cigarettes towards him, and went back to her desk.

Gilbert drank and smoked in silence for ten minutes, then Mary went out licking the flap of an envelope.

"That's that," she said as she came back into the room. She came and sat on a low stool beside his chair and leaned her head against his knee.

"I am pleased to see you, Gilbert, but I just had to get that job through. You mustn't mind." She looked up at him with rather a wan smile. "You're looking very young and fit, and better-looking than is good for you. I'm just worn out, that's all."

"Working too hard."

"No, not that. I keep fit on work, but emotional complications."

Gilbert was not in the mood to consider Mary's emotional complications; he resented this intrusion of her personal worries; he had wanted her so ardently, come to her so eagerly, only to find her tired and worried and depressed. He had the feeling that she had let him down.

He said, in an attempt to establish the atmosphere he wanted, "Poor darling. But don't think about it all now. Let us go and feed somewhere jolly, and dance, and be happy. Thinking about worries doesn't dissolve them."

She gave him a swift glance, startled by his complete indifference to any problem that might be either harassing or harrowing her, or both.

She rose. "I expect you're right. I'll go and have a bath and change—I daresay one can put on light-heartedness if not beauty like a dress if one tries hard enough. I'll try to put on both. Help yourself to drinks—and there's the evening paper."

He caught her hand and drew her down on to the arm of his chair and kissed her, without either passion or tenderness. He kissed her because it seemed the indicated thing to do, not because of any up-welling of emotion. This was not the woman he had desired so intensely in Rome; he had never known this tired, pale, spiritless woman, but someone cool and tranquil and self-possessed, of a gravity or a gaiety to suit his mood. He was aware as he kissed her of the smell of cigarette smoke that invaded her hair and clothes, and of her lack of response. She allowed him to kiss her precisely in the same spirit as that in which he kissed her—it was the indicated thing to do.

She went into the bathroom and turned on the geyser, then sat down on the dressing-stool for a moment and buried her face in her hands.

If only there could be someone who could love one when one was tired and grubby and depressed, someone into whose heart one could creep for restfulness and peace and loving sympathy. . . . So much loving in the world, and so little love. . . .

She rose abruptly with an air of pulling herself together. No use going to pieces; take a couple of aspirins, a hot bath with a

lavish handful of those expensive bath-salts to destroy the inferiority complex induced by smoky working clothes; wash away the worries, put on clean clothes, a dress with something gay about it. . . . 'And put on beauty like a dress' . . . and for God's sake stop thinking. . . .

But that was something one could not do. One's thoughts pursued one relentlessly. All right; face the facts, then; don't sentimentalise. This Gilbert Stroud is young; his attitude to women is all wrong; he has met all the wrong kinds of women, and women have done something to him that can't be undone. He isn't in love with you; he has never pretended to be; he likes you merely because you're different from the other women he has known; you don't exploit your sex-appeal. You're in love with him, but that's not his fault.

Loving people is a ridiculous and painful business. Why should Gilbert be interested in my troubles? They bore him, naturally. You can't help people unless you care for them. People don't love; at least, not many of them; they love themselves, and the idea of themselves in love.

She wept weakly whilst she undressed. Ridiculous to weep, she reminded herself, so utterly futile; queer tricks one's nerves played on one's intelligence; but if one only weren't so utterly tired, exhausted by all the things life did to one. . . .

Fifteen minutes later when she put her head round the sitting-room door Gilbert was astounded by the difference in her appearance. This cool sweet Mary, white skin gleaming against the embroidered black silk of her kimono, was the woman he had dreamed about. A breath of her perfume drifted towards him, enticingly. She smiled at him.

"I feel miles better now; come and talk to me whilst I dress."

The eagerness with which he came towards her and took her into his arms, sought her lips, wounded her. Did they make so much difference, then, these things that came out of jars and bottles? Must one indeed put on beauty like a dress to make one's body and soul acceptable?

"Mary," he cried, "you're adorable!"

She resisted the temptation to tell him that she was the same Mary as fifteen minutes ago.

She made no further attempt to discuss her worries with Gilbert, and he never inquired into her private life. It did not occur to him that his attitude towards her was entirely selfish; he simply did not think about it. He did not want to know anything about that life which she did not live with him. He liked to go to her flat and sit by her fire and smoke and talk or make love to her according to his mood; he liked to dance and dine with her, and occasionally to wake in the morning and find her at his side. The world they had created together was charming and delightful, and any dragging in of the odds and ends of any outside world could only spoil it. He liked people's private lives to remain private. One's contacts with people, he found, yielded quite enough interest and complication without trying to reach out and gather in their contacts with others. The gospel of unselfishness bored him profoundly. Bernhardt was right; the real art of living lay in living selfishly; one's own egotism produced quite enough problems without concerning oneself with the problems of other egos. One had to be concentric, or fail miserably. It was so fatally easy to let life drag at one, pulling one all ways, distracting one from one's objective. He was tired of idling, and after he had been back in London a week cabled his father: "Through with seeing Europe. What next?"

His father cabled back: "Stroud's Tours, Ltd. Sailing on the *Empress of Scotland* on the 20th. Reserve rooms your hotel."

This reply excited his imagination. To get down to something—it was what he wanted; it was the direct road to his objective. He had played about long enough. There was scope for a big thing to be made out of a combined passenger and cargo service. If that Liverpool firm they had been negotiating with closed with their offer, they had a nucleus ready to hand, and they could build up from that. And they would close, of course—they would see the business sense of merging their business into the Stroud organisation rather than going bankrupt because of it later. Such a deal was something worth while being keen about; one could make something of a business like that—something worth handing over to one's son. Being automatically absorbed into a business built up by one's father and grandfather and great-grandfather,

created by generations of Stroud men, left him cold; but the idea of building as it were an entirely new wing on to the already existing edifice, stirred his imagination; to build something oneself—that was the essence of achievement. It was impossible, he thought, to be excited about something other people had built up, but it was vastly different to feel something grow under one's direction, gathering power and vitality from forces within oneself, expanding month by month, year by year, and knowing that one's own brains were the controlling and creating power. And he could do it; he was convinced of that; power was the breath of life to the Stroud men; they achieved it because of driving forces within themselves; they had the germ of power within them, and they got what they wanted, whether women or money, because of the dynamic quality of their desires.

And with money and power behind him, why should he not be acceptable to some proud thoroughbred woman, so that his son should have breeding and a new quality infused into the Stroud blood, a new glory added to its traditions? They had not been fastidious enough, those powerful ancestors of his; they had chosen women at the urge of their blood, instead of by the discrimination of their mind's calculations; they had thought that any woman would do so long as she got them at least one son to carry on the long line, with the result that his grandfather was coarse, and his father had the blood of the *bourgeoisie* in his veins, and, in turn, following the dictates of what was bred in him, had chosen the daughter of a small shop-keeper to be the mother of his son—or rather had left it to Nature to choose for him. They had forgotten their pride, these arrogant Stroud men with the hot blood; so long as they had power it was all they cared about, but it spelt degeneracy and only sons; left a *bourgeoisie* taint in the Stroud tradition. It was all wrong, Gilbert thought, passionately; so old and powerful a family should breed with discrimination. Gilbert Stroud's son should be born of a patrician mother; with him, Gilbert Stroud, the last drop of *bourgeois* blood should be eradicated from the long line of Stroud men, and with his son begin an epoch of Stroud regeneration. . . .

Thus Gilbert Stroud dreaming in those London days whilst awaiting John Stroud's arrival and the launching of the new company and the beginning of a new phase.

STROUD'S TOURS, LTD.

I

JOHN STROUD was delighted by the change in his son. Instead of the restless, nerve-ridden boy who had come out of the war not knowing what he wanted to do, he found a young man whose restlessness was transmuted into an impatience to get to work, to do something. He congratulated himself on his idea of the European tour; it had done the boy good; nothing like knocking about the world a bit, getting this woman business out of your system, getting over the war, and getting everything into a sane perspective. Gilbert's idea of a patrician marriage appealed to him; a little English blue blood fused with the lusty red Stroud blood would be all to the good—a little idealistic, perhaps, but it might save the boy from making the matrimonial blunders that he himself had made, and a boy of Gilbert's highly strung temperament would work for an ideal where he would be bored by tradition. . . .

The board of Stroud's Tours, Ltd., was to include himself and another director of the Montreal company, Gilbert as managing director. "And," said John Stroud, "we must have a name. Tucker says he knows the very person. Lord Merrill. He's on the board of nearly every company in London—makes his living that way. Will lend his noble name to any company for two hundred a year; and it looks so well on the letter-head: directors, Lord Merrill—or the Earl of Tringham, but Lord looks better, I think; people like lords, particularly the kind that will patronise Stroud's tours-de-luxe, travelling out to Marseilles with cars and back from the Canaries with bananas. Tucker's arranging a luncheon at Merrill's house at Regent's Park—his lordship don't know it, of course, and will think the luncheon is his own idea; Tucker's clever at handling people, and what he don't know about the peerage and how to handle it ain't worth knowin'! He was up there the other day, trying to get hold of old Merrill, but only got through to his secretary. Slippery old boy, apparently, inflated notion of his own importance and all that. The house is all decayed gentility, Tucker says, and Merrill goes about looking shabby enough to be a millionaire. There's no countess—died about twenty years ago, I believe; there's a daughter keeps house, the

Lady Isabel; only child. Come to think of it, my boy, you might do worse than marry there! No money there, of course, but plenty of blue blood—as blue as anything. Dilapidated castle somewhere on the Border, and a shooting that he lets to pay the interest on the estate mortgages. Tucker says the old boy is frankly waiting about for his daughter to marry money. I asked him if he thought she'd take me on, but he says she's the proud cold sort—frightful contempt for merchant princes and all that, but mighty easy to look at, I will say, judging by her pictures in the illustrated weeklies. But I don't go much on that type myself—blue blood and no natural impulses. Like 'em warm and passionate myself, and never mind where they come from." He chuckled. "The good healthy natural animal is what I like—guess it's in the Stroud blood."

Gilbert said coldly, "And that's where the Strouds have made their mistake."

"Oh, is it? You don't say! And you're going to set out to show 'em better, eh? Save the family from degeneration and ultimate sterility and all that? Well, since you're so refined and high purposed, you might do worse than have a look at Lady Isabel, for if you like that sort of thing, that's the sort of thing you'll like. But better you than me. Here's luck!"

Gilbert regarded his father with distaste and did not answer. But privately he hunted through the illustrated weeklies until he found a picture, of 'The Lady Isabel Merrill, the beautiful only daughter of the Earl of Tringham, and generally acknowledged one of the most beautiful women in society.'

There was a studio portrait, and a smaller one showing the Lady Isabel sitting on the steps of Tringham Castle with a couple of Alsatian dogs. Gilbert gazed intently at the studio portrait, absorbing every detail of that beautiful, expressionless face. It was expressionless not in the sense of vacuity, but in its coldness. The wide eyes held nothing but indifference, and the small exquisite unsmiling mouth gave the impression that if it relaxed into a smile it would be a conventional, mechanical smile. Such a woman, Gilbert thought, would neither love nor hate; she might be coldly tolerant, or coldly contemptuous. . . . But if one reached the point where one held such a woman in one's arms, the miracle of such an achievement would be worth all the easy conquests in the

world, then indeed one might feed on honey-dew of sheerest ecstasy and drink the milk of Paradise. One would taste a super-rapture, as though the Blessed Damozel had leaned out of the gold bars of heaven and permitted one to kiss her hand. . . .

And then Gilbert smiled at the literary quality of his thoughts, and tore out the picture of that so lovely lady and pinned it above his bed because the symbolism of the idea amused him.

2

Gilbert disliked intensely the way in which his father discussed women in general and his aim in particular. It seemed to him incredible that there had ever been a time when he had admired his father, seen him in a swaggering, cavalier light, as a cynical Don Juan, and sought to model himself upon him. He was, he perceived, nothing but a sensualist, without sufficient subtlety or sensitiveness for the making of a cynic. He liked to assert that women were unimportant, and yet he lived for them; they mattered to him, Gilbert realised, infinitely more than business; it was his side line, since one had to do something during the day, and the day was merely rather a boring passage to be endured until the night. Sex-ridden, sex-driven, Gilbert thought contemptuously.

And yet he envied him his gay carelessness, his careless gaiety. There was something romantically Byronic about him. He enjoyed life enormously, in a heedless, unthinking way. Perhaps it was because he did not think about it that he did enjoy it, Gilbert thought. He was shameless, conscienceless, unscrupulous, and you did not realise his hardness and utter selfishness because he was so gay, and his selfishness did not prevent him from being lavish with gifts. He showered money, flowers, perfume, jewellery, upon his mistresses; in externals he was generous to a degree, but it was for himself that he lived, for his own amusement and pleasure, and people who were not as gay as he was both bored and irritated him. He could forgive a woman anything so long as she was beautiful and amusing and emotionally responsive to his ardours. He did not even demand of her outstanding beauty so long as she was passionate and gay, and it did not matter in the least whether she was society belle or servant girl, so long as she had the requisite

qualities. He was fond of saying that there were only two kinds of women—those who were bedworthy and those who were not.

Upon this point Gilbert was inclined to agree, but the thing went deeper than that, he thought, it extended beyond the confines of sex; there was some indefinable quality emanating from some people that stirred one's imagination. One could not say what it was; one sensed it in complete strangers, both men and women, something which excited the imagination. Stemway had it. . . .

Stem! He could not recall those Roman days without a queer quickening of the pulses. The full realisation of the extent to which Stemway had fastened upon his imagination had not come to him until now. At St. Moritz his image had been effaced by that of Bernhardt. For a little while back in England he had been absorbed in his relationship with Mary. But now that Mary had sunk into an accepted part of his life, somebody who was always there, as a wife might be, the brooding ghost of Stemway crept back into his consciousness. He knew now how intensely Stemway mattered and would always matter, even if he never saw him again. He would never be able to make Mary Thane matter like that. He could not raise her above the level of somebody who satisfied his physical needs without making impossible mental and emotional demands upon him; and somebody to whom he could talk without being expected to listen in return; it was her complete undemandingness which held him to her, but in spite of the peace she afforded him it was impossible to feel with her that sense of spiritual kinship; partly because she was a woman and the sex issue must always be present, even when in the background, and partly because she lacked that strange quality of personality which seizes upon the imagination and never relaxes its hold; a flame as unquenchable as a fever of the blood is ephemeral. Nobody, certainly no woman, could ever replace Nicholas Stemway in his life.

And Stemway wrote to him from Rome:

"The flat is abominably lonely since you left. It's only the thought that one day you'll come back that makes me keep it on. When are you coming? Already the spring begins to creep in a slow tide of almond blossom up the hillsides of Tivoli, and to lave

the Palatine. Don't you ever dream of the wind that sweeps the Campagna, or see the snow on the Sabines? Don't you ever recall the scones and cream and honey in the little tea-house of the Golden Gate, under the old wall? The cedar continues to wave its arms like banners from the gardens of the Barberini Palace—the day you come back to Rome we'll hang out flags from the balcony and get drunk every night and stay drunk every day in one continuous *festa*."

No reproaches for his not having written from St. Moritz, or failed to keep his promise to come to England before Stemway had to return to Rome. That lack of spoken reproach was a reproach that Gilbert found almost intolerable. Something in him wept. He wrote to Stemway:

"I feel beastly when I think of how I let you down over the Christmas vacation proposition. I don't even know what to say about it. I guess I'm a selfish sort of swine. Don't think too rottenly of me. When are you coming to England?"

When Stemway next wrote he mentioned other matters contained in the same letter, but made no comment on Gilbert's apology. But there was a heartening postscript: "I'll try and wangle a few days at Easter, and then I'll come to England. We must meet. I'd prefer that it should be at my home so that we can go tramping about the hills."

It was for Gilbert like a direct road to redemption, his chance to make recompense. He wrote ardently that he would love to stay at Stemway's house during Easter. "Perhaps," he wrote, in the rush of emotionalism that is by conscience out of affection, "we'll recapture something that we loved and lost awhile; something that came to us in the gardens of the Villa d'Este, when we looked out between the cypresses and saw St. Peter's far away across the Campagna like the sail of a ship on the horizon. Do you remember? We'll climb the hills and dream of Tivoli."

And this time he echoed on paper and in his heart what Stemway had said to him when they had parted at the Swiss frontier: "*Arrivederci*." It seemed to him then that more than anything in life he wanted to walk and talk again with Stemway, and Easter seemed intolerably remote.

But when Easter came and Stemway arrived in London and telephoned the Mayfair flat which Gilbert was sharing with his father, he received the message that Mr. Gilbert Stroud had left the message that he was very sorry he had unavoidably had to go out; would Mr. Stemway ring again in the morning.

Their appointment for that evening was of at least a month's standing, and until six o'clock of that evening Gilbert had not merely intended, but intensely looked forward to, keeping it. But at six o'clock Isabel Merrill had rung up to tell him that he must accompany her to a party; he was to call for her at seven, and he had not even tried to get out of it. At that stage he could not afford to do so. A man does not abandon the hunt when galloping breakneck towards the kill.

•

AT THE BALLET

THAT evening of Stemway's arrival in London Gilbert dined with great tediousness at the house of a Cabinet Minister, and went on afterwards to the Russian Ballet. They had a box, and Isabel Merrill was a miracle of beauty, so that people looked at her and wondered if she were a stage star. And when Gilbert removed his eyes from her and surveyed the crowded house, in the front row of the upper circle he saw a pale face with a lock of dark hair falling over the brow, and knew that it was Stemway, and that he had seen him. He was looking full at the box, but Gilbert looked away and pretended not to have seen him.

Isabel, surveying the house through mother-of-pearl opera-glasses, followed the direction Gilbert's eyes had travelled and came to rest on the upper circle. He heard her saying, "I suppose those are the real enthusiasts? It must be very uncomfortable to be perched up so high. The intelligentsia are really extraordinary-looking. Just look at that red-haired girl hanging over the railing in the front row! Did you ever see anything as red as that hair? And that odd-looking person with the flowing tie next to her. I suppose they are the authentic ballet fans and highbrows. Isn't that a queer-looking young man by the centre aisle—the intense-looking one with the black hair falling over his brow. . . ."

Gilbert wondered what she would say if he said, "That queer-looking young man is my dearest friend." He despised himself for his inability to say it. Why hadn't he the moral courage to go round to the upper circle and bring Stemway down to the box? Why couldn't one say to the wife of a Cabinet Minister, to a foreign ambassador, and to an earl's daughter, "That young man in the upper circle has more guts and intelligence and decency in his composition than anyone in this box, and if I brought him down here I would be performing a symbolic act and bringing him down to our level." One didn't because one was a snob; and one was a snob not because one was rotten inside, but because one was afraid; people sapped one's courage, one's decency; one was a snob because one was afraid of snobbery, because of ridiculous, pitiful social inferiority complexes that one wanted to hide; one slaughtered

one's decent instincts to make a coward's holiday. It is easy for the patrician to patronise the plebeian, he thought, he has nothing to lose; but when one is of the plebeian order, but whirling like a planet up to patrician spheres, one has everything to lose and nothing to gain by hailing one's kind as one passes. He told himself passionately that his own connections with trade were obstacles enough in the starry way that led to Lord Merrill's daughter, without dragging in any other red rags to wave before the little foolish eyes of the great god class distinction.

So that when she asked him if he had seen that queer-looking young man in the upper circle, he answered, more truly than he realised, "When you are here, how can I see anyone but you?"

At which she laughed, a little contemptuously, as women do when men who mean nothing to them pay them compliments.

But a hot sense of shame prickled under his skin, and that something in him which wept sometimes when he thought of Stem, wept now. Stem, I can't help it; these people don't understand; it isn't even snobbishness with them, really—not the conscious snobbery of the *bourgeoisie*, anyhow. It's a kind of inborn class-consciousness; they may believe in democracy in theory, but it's quite impossible for them in practice because it's opposed to all their deeper instincts. . . .

But even in the midst of his own self-defence something in him insisted that Stem would only smile at this, drolly, amusedly, make some stinging subversive remark, or proceed to an analysis of those deeper instincts. He shuddered to think of the shattering effect of Stem introduced to Isabel's circle. No unwashed and unshaven Bolshevik from Darkest Russia would be more completely devastating. It would be wild fun, of course, if it were not for Isabel. At that point he dared not offend Isabel; the realisation of all his dreams depended on his pleasing her, so that it was not at all a question of choosing between his friend and the woman of his desire, but of choosing between his allegiance to an impassioned friendship and an allegiance to an impassioned dream. As in the St. Moritz matter, he had to choose between Stem and himself, and as then he chose himself. It was the insistent Stroud egotism asserting itself, and it was useless attempting to resist it; there was this thing in him which thrust forward relentlessly, reaching

out to grasp what it wanted, and would not be frustrated. If you were a Stroud you hurt yourself as much as you hurt others in striding to your objective, but in the end you achieved it, and that—if you were a Stroud—was all that mattered; the thing that wept and beseeched and bled in you was nothing beside the thing in you that insisted; humiliation and remorse and self-despising were nothing; you had to go on, urged forward always by something in you that was as blind as it was violent. . . .

And at this, too, Gilbert knew, Stem would smile, that droll smile that was yet a little sarcastic, and he would murmur—almost it seemed to Gilbert he could hear him—“Really? But how amusing!”

He was glad when the overture, to which no one had listened, was over and the curtain parted on the moonlit mystery of Swan Lake, and the lovely music of Tchaikovsky crept out and flooded the quiet darkness of the house. So often Stem had talked of the Ballet, and now they were seeing it together and yet so incredibly far apart. All through the blue and white symphony of the ballet Gilbert saw nothing, heard nothing, but a lamp-lit stone-floored room poised above the moon-bathed domes and house-tops of Rome, and that same music escaping under Stemway's fingers where he sat at the piano in a circle of light. . . .

When the lights went up again he remembered that the next ballet was *L'Après-midi d'un Faun*, and wondered whether he could stand it without going out to Stemway and admitting his humiliation.

He glanced up to the circle, but with the first reed-like notes of the opening bars he saw Stemway get up and leave the house.

XVIII

INTROVERT

I

STEMWAY called at Gilbert's flat in the morning. He said, "I came round because I am going home this afternoon, and I wanted to know if you are coming. You promised, but I am beginning to lose faith in promises. I must leave for Rome on Tuesday."

"Would you be very disgusted with me if I let you down again, Stem?"

Stemway shrugged. "Nothing in human nature ever surprises me, and I long ago made up my mind that it was best to forgive the whole world beforehand."

"It's so frantically difficult to do as one wants in this life."

"Is it? I think it's easy to do as one wants—I think one always does. One can always find an excuse for doing what one wants to do, and for not doing the things one doesn't want to do. Are you free to lunch with me?"

"No, but I'm free for you to lunch with me."

Stemway smiled. He said with the sudden boyish enthusiasm of which he was sometimes capable, "It's early yet; let's go and sit in Fountain Court; we can walk up through the Embankment gardens, and talk and kid ourselves it's the Pincio. And let's have steak and beer at a Fleet Street pub."

Gilbert was both relieved and humiliated by the fact that Stemway did not refer to the ballet. He was convinced that Stemway knew that he had seen him, and he felt that his friend revealed a kind of lofty superiority by not alluding to the fact. Stemway was, humiliatingly, so much 'bigger' than he was himself. He looked at him where he sprawled on the over-upholstered brocaded settee.

"It's nice to see you again, Stem," he said, and the old ardour with which he had written urging Stemway to come to England swept him, so that the simple sincere statement sounded ridiculously and hopelessly inadequate.

Stemway smiled. "For God's sake shed that decadent dressing-gown and get into whatever it is you exquisite people wear when you walk abroad in the morning. I can't stand much more of this

exotic atmosphere, all flowers and satin cushions and cream enamel and Chinese rugs and silk lamp-shades."

Gilbert laughed. "It is rather exotic, isn't it? But my father's lady-friends come here to tea and simply adore it, I understand. But it's rather hard to find anything monastic in Mayfair, anyhow."

"So I imagine. But why live in Mayfair?"

"It's a good address—both for social and business purposes."

"I see. Well thank God I shall sit on a hard bench and eat a hearty vulgar steak and drink a good plebeian beer for lunch. If I lived here long I should take to eating chocolate éclairs and reading Elinor Glyn. It's not artistic enough for absinthe and Baudelaire, I'm afraid."

Gilbert laughed; he did not mind Stemway being rude about anything so long as he was not bitter or reproachful or morose.

When they came out into Half Moon Street the sky was pale blue silk and there was a crisp fresh smell and feel of spring on the air. A scent of violets and lilies came to them from a flower-seller's tray at the corner of the street, and the Park broke in a wave of delicate green upon the noisy motley of Piccadilly. They walked along Piccadilly, down the lower Regent Street and the steps of Waterloo Place to St. James's Park, and came by way of Westminster to the Embankment gardens and a silver gleam of river between a filigree of young leaves, and daffodils lined up in their borders as for a pageant, standing stiffly self-conscious in the grass under the trees like nice children who have been given permission to run wild and don't quite know how to set about it.

"Daffodils in gardens are like birds in cages," Stemway remarked "All the same, for the next few hours I can live 'ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever.' It's not often one can do that. I think I shall write a poem. 'There is a music singing in the wind, like golden bells upon the thin blue air.' I've started writing again."

"Again? I didn't know you ever did."

"I did. The war rather killed it. Mine wasn't that hardy muse that flourishes in mud and blood. Since the war I've torn up everything as fast as I've written it—it hasn't seemed adequate. When nearly everyone one knows is writing, and doing it rather well, in a slick, facile sort of fashion, it doesn't seem worth the

while of people who take the art of letters seriously, unless one can be really first-rate; we've enough second-raters and non-quitters and promising people who never get beyond the stage of promise, to last us all several lifetimes. If one must write, one must, but there's no need to rush into print with it. I'm quite sure the amount of unpublished first-rate stuff exceeds that of the published."

But Gilbert was not thinking about literature, published or unpublished, but of Stemway.

"You're a funny devil, Stem! All the time we were together, and you never said a word about your writing."

"I didn't think it would interest you. I'm a rank inhibitionist, anyhow." He changed the subject abruptly. "I wonder how Raymore and his Dorothy are getting on? Do you remember that night when he came all over dramatic and walked out into the night in the best Lyceum manner?"

"We were rather cruel to Raymore."

"Not really; he loved it."

"It all seems ages ago now."

"It doesn't to me. It depends how much one has lived in the meantime how far away yesterday seems, of course. 'Give me my moments, you may keep your years'—and the gods took Middleton at his word. I'm sure that whom the gods love do die young—Keats, Shelley, Middleton, Chatterton. Perhaps they consume their lives by their own flame—better than guttering out, anyhow."

They turned up out of the gardens and came into Fountain Court and sat under a plane tree. There was a sense of peace, despite the roar of the great sea of Fleet Street seething beyond the breakwater of the buildings. The lightly leaved branches made a shadow-tracery upon the stones; birds played by the fountain's brim, with soft happy flutterings; pigeons stalked and preened themselves in the pale gold sunlight.

"Do you remember the fountain on the Pincio?" Stemway asked, and his voice held a yearning note. He knew that he did not need to ask Gilbert; but there is in those words, 'Do you remember . . .' a wistful magic that summons up remembrance of things past, old intimacies and happinesses and dreams. It is

that happiest of all talk between friends, and Gilbert and Stemway talked, and remembered, and were silent.

That sense of communion flowed again between them; invisible cords binding them, weaving the threads of their separate lives into one shining fabric, making articulate the silences.

Stemway said presently, "About my not telling you about my writing—it's queer, but it's almost impossible to talk about one's inner self to the people who matter; it's easier to talk to the people who mean nothing to you and don't care about you—only they're not interested, so one doesn't. But not to feel constrained to talk—it's the essence of friendship; not to feel constrained to explain oneself. . . ."

Gilbert wondered, uncomfortably, whether Stem was making it easy for him about that theatre encounter—dismissing for ever any need to refer to it. It was queer how impossible it was to talk to Stem about Isabel, the flame that was burning up his life.

Swept by one of those ardours of impulse which Stemway induced in him, he said suddenly, "Look here, Stem, go by a later train and I'll come with you—I've got a tea appointment, and I can make my excuses then about this wretched house-party that's supposed to occupy my Easter."

Stemway's eyes were like flames in their eagerness as he looked up. "Do you mean it, Gilbert? Don't say you mean it if you're not really serious about it—it means so much to me to have you stay at my home—I can't tell you. I've dreamed of it for months."

Gilbert said with an easy, happy resoluteness—he was so sure of himself this time—"I mean it all right, Stem; I won't let you down again."

He told himself firmly that a woman, however desired, ought not to be permitted to intrude upon a friendship. A woman had spoiled his friendship with Bernhardt—who did not matter; a woman should not be allowed to spoil his friendship with Stemway—who did. There were other week-ends; he could see Isabel at any time; but Stemway would be going back to Rome; it was absurd to allow oneself to be at the beck and call of any woman, however exquisite, however imperious. Isabel was an ideal he had to accomplish, but Stemway mattered emotionally—he was a part of his life. Why should he sacrifice a friendship that was so integral

a part of himself in order to achieve a woman? One had to learn how to have one's cake and eat it; that was the essence of power. She might even respect him a little, he thought, this proud arrogant woman who made no attempt to conceal her contempt for him because she was so sure of him, when she saw that he was not after all afraid of incurring her displeasure. She was a woman, and therefore could be bought; but one could not buy friendship. A sense of defiance, of veiled hostility, towards this woman whom he was determined to possess in the spirit in which a collector determines to secure some rare *objet d'art* surged within him. He enjoyed, too, this sensation of risk; it gave piquancy to the war of wills, a new zest to the determination. She should see that she did not hold him in the hollow of her lovely hand, that even the most rare and exquisite orchid may be casually, almost carelessly, acquired if one has the taste for it, and money enough to satisfy that taste.

2

He and Stemway lunched at the Punch Tavern in high spirits. It was arranged that they should meet at the station.

"Be at the barrier at six-thirty for the six-forty train," Stemway suggested.

Gilbert was almost as excited as Stemway. A whole week-end free of women, and the torment and humiliation they can heap upon a man, were infinitely attractive. The blessed restfulness of it! They would swim in the stream and tramp the hills and the long white roads that should remind them of the Appian Way, and linking them would be that sense of communion and kinship that has no need of speech. And at last he would have done something for Stem—Stem who mattered so intensely, and yet whose friendship he had already twice betrayed through selfishness and once through lack of moral courage—which was after all merely another manifestation of selfishness. He was given a second chance to make recompense. . . .

They parted at the corner of Wellington Street. Office girls returning to their offices after their tea-shop luncheons turned to glance up at the tall, hatless young man with the curious dark lock of hair falling over his forehead; he was, they knew, not like other people, though they could not say why; most people who were

different were 'odd,' or 'queer,' but he was different without being either, and his strangeness attracted them; they did not know it was his strangeness—it was as though something flowed out from him and compelled them. Men looked to him, too, and could not have said why any more than the stenographers. "Attractive," thought the women, "interesting," thought the men, and both knew that the adjectives were inadequate, not exactly what they meant, although they meant it; but Stemway did not fit into any of their categories, and therefore none of their stock adjectives fitted him. Gilbert knew this. He had known it in Rome; every encounter with Stemway made him increasingly aware of it. Nicholas Stemway could not be judged by any normal standards because he did not even remotely conform to any of them. You could not say why or how he was different; you only knew that it was so; you felt it. Women had three criterions by which they judged male attractiveness. A man was good-looking, or he was ugly, or he was 'not really good-looking but pleasant.' Stemway was attractive to women without being any of these three things. Therefore men and women alike looked at him, drawn by a dark bitter, passionate quality that eluded their definition, yet powerfully attracted them, stirring equally undefined emotions within themselves. . . .

But Stemway, standing on the corner of Wellington Street on that spring day, was not aware of any glances. The flame of eagerness by which he burned shone out of his dark eyes

"You'll keep your word, Gilbert? If you don't, God knows when we'll meet again—not for a year, anyhow, and in a year anything may happen, and having once resigned myself to the disappointment of your not coming, and then having you stir up everything all over again by offering to come after all——" He broke off with his attractive shy smile. "Well, you do see, don't you? It matters tremendously to me—you're the only friend I care a dam' about—there's only you and my mother in my life; ever since I've known you I've wanted you two to meet. Every friendship I've had yet has crashed——"

His eyes had clouded again, and that sudden extinguishing of their light induced a rush of emotion in Gilbert which embarrassed him with the fear that it might betray him into gushing, out of

consciousness of the sheer inadequacy of anything that could be said. Yet at all costs one mustn't lapse into bathos and sentimentality.

He faltered, confusedly. "Don't be absurd, Stem, this isn't going to crash. Wasn't I dogging your footsteps before I ever knew your name?"

"I know. It's the queer fatalism of the thing that gets me. I was horribly bitter and cynical about everybody and everything when I came out of the army, and enjoying my exile in Rome in a bitter sort of way, until Fate or Destiny, or whatever it was shoved you at me, and," he smiled, "you've taken root."

"I'll stay rooted. *Arrivederci*."

Stemway laughed. "At six-thirty this evening to be precise." They shook hands. Gilbert hailed a passing taxi and gave his address in Half Moon Street. Stemway plunged into the seething maelstrom of the Strand like a swimmer into a rough sea, and emerged safely on the other side.

He went striding away up the Aldwych, his head thrown back, his eyes seeing, not the palaces of commerce of the Kingsway, but the grey walls of the Cotswold country, apple-blossom crowding over them in a riot of spring. . . . And now he was in his book-lined room with its whitewashed walls and plain wooden bed, writing-table and chair, and one low 'Varsity chair drawn up before a brick fireplace fashioned for logs, and Gilbert was there, too, fingering his books, looking out on the countryside he had so often looked out upon as a boy, and forever afterwards that room should hold something of Gilbert's spirit. . . . And now he and Gilbert were racing in the stream, the cold clear water stinging their bodies deliciously. . . . And now he was saying, "Mother, this is my friend, Gilbert Stroud." . . . My friend, Gilbert Stroud. . . . And they were sitting together, the three of them, he in the middle, on either side of him the two people who were dearest in the world, the only people who were dear, and there was peace, and happiness washing about him in warm waves, because he was surrounded by people who made no demands, who understood one's silences as well as one's words; people whom one could love abundantly without losing one's self-respect; people whom one could love selflessly without intrusion of dark desires, that like

distorted dæmon could seize upon one's mind and body and wrack it with an agony of humiliation and self-disgust. . . .

In some other age it might be that Nicholas Stemway would have inhabited the cell of an ascetic or worn the hair-shirt of a monk, and burned at last like Savonarola, in ecstasy upon the fanatic's pyre.

Having strayed into the twentieth century, he strode between the palaces of commerce, and threading his mind like gold threads woven into a dark tapestry, wandered the music of last night's ballet . . . and there you have all his life, a dark tapestry of war and conflict and confusion and disillusion, picked out with the gold threads of his sensitive, impassioned devotions.

3

In a fever of eager anticipation he waited at the barrier that evening. Waited with a growing impatience that surged up into a tidal wave of panic. Waited until the train steamed out, and Gilbert still had not come. And even then he refused to believe that he had not kept his promise. He rushed to a telephone box and telephoned Gilbert's flat. He was told that Mr. Stroud had gone away for the week-end. No, he had not left any message; just that if anyone called up he had gone away until after Easter.

Stemway hung up the receiver and came out of the telephone box. There was an hour to wait for the next train. He walked to the nearest seat and sat down. His mind seemed to him to race like an engine. No, no message, of course not; why should there be? Why should anyone explain his actions? Why should anyone expect anything of anyone, ever? One lived surrounded by lies. Everyone lied; they had to, life compelled them. Truth was merely a beautiful myth, a hallucination of a world made delirious with the fever of life's lies. It were better to forgive everything beforehand. . . . One sat alone in an empty house waiting for someone to come in and kindle a fire that one could somehow not kindle in solitude; sometimes one heard a faint footfall, steps drawing nearer; one's heart beat high with expectancy. O foolish, eager, expectant heart! For no one came; why should they? One went on waiting, helplessly, and the air grew colder, and the darkness wrapped one round; presently one ceased to listen; numb with

the cold, one cared no longer about the unlighted fire; it did not matter; one retired within oneself. . . .

People sentimentalised about the horror of war; he had done so himself; but what after all did it matter? It was natural to us; we slayed each other's spirits and thought nothing of it; why not slay each other in the flesh; it at least could only die once. So much insistence on the importance of the flesh, so little on the spirit; and the spirit our only hope of immortality. . . . But the mistake we made was in our pitiful clinging to the shreds of belief, the persistence with which we saw more in people than there was, endowed them with attributes of truth and spiritual beauty that they never could possess. Queer how one could come through a world-war and go on letting life fool one afterwards; the incurable romanticism in human nature. . . . God, what a soft, sentimental lot of incorrigible idealists we all were! We should be grateful for wars, pestilences and sudden deaths; they were ways of escape. . . .

The restless station crowd surged about him like a dark sea as he sat there, elbows on his knees, his hands clasping his face, the long fingers bent at the tips where they pressed into the throbbing temples. People looked at him, their attention arrested by the savage despair held in his brooding eyes, the mask-like whiteness of his face. He did not see them; his brain seethed. He saw the days before the war, himself at Oxford, aflame with ideals. Had he really wanted to enter the Church, really believed that he had a vocation, been passionate about his beliefs? How far away and unreal it all seemed, as though it had happened to someone else to know those ecstasies and fervours. And the war, the ridiculous enthusiasm with which one joined up; that sunny day when he had marched away across the parade-ground at Whitehall; and then the crowded canvas of those war years, hating and resenting it all, and belief being stripped away from him like bark from a tree; something atrophying in him; perishing. . . . Something like a brain-storm shook him as he went over those years; he could not see anything clearly for the blood-dark chaos of it; the storm abated and the mind yielded up clearer pictures; the base hospital in a church—Gilbert Stroud was there, too; it seemed somehow queer that they had not known of each other's existence; then the

prison camp and that episode with the officer; solitary confinement; that unspeakable unregistered camp; the 'Aussies'; the walking to and fro, to and fro, behind the barbed wire, like animals at some monstrous zoo; the first news of the Armistice; the march through Hamburg; the embarkment at Denmark; the fêting, chocolates and cigarettes; the troopship and men vomiting from their stomachs the unaccustomed food; men's stomachs learned to do without food as their souls learned to do without belief; then England; Oxford again; that persistent sense of unreality; walking the same streets that one had walked with such tremendous beliefs, and not even a tattered shred remained of all that had been so bright and shining and valiant; still seeking a way of escape, but not for humanity, for oneself alone, for the war did that to one, threw one back upon oneself, and not through any personal Deity or glowing idealism, or any other such ready-made way of escape, was escape possible. One had seen through too much, endured too much, been robbed of too much. One had to drag something out of one's inner consciousness, something one liked to call a philosophy. And then Rome—and Gilbert Stroud, restless, at a loose-end, so very much like himself, and between them that consuming sense of kinship only possible between two people who have gone through similar experiences and known similar reactions. . . . Gilbert, and a swimming up to the surface of life again. . . .

He rose resolutely and paced the wide pavement, with the indicator boards on one side and the booking-halls and cloakrooms on the other. It was unreasonable to feel one's friendships so deeply, to allow any one person to matter so intensely, to fasten so strongly upon the imagination. Unreasonable? But so was war, and so was life. Was it unreasonable, when one felt oneself drowning, to clutch at a straw—unreasonable to experience again that sickening sense of sinking when it was wrenched away? Some people clung to the God-idea, and some to a shimmering mirage they called love; some turned to work as a drug, and some to pleasure; it was all the same thing, humanity's pitiful groping for a way of escape from life, for a refuge from the bewildering, exhausting chaos of living. And if one had nothing, and no one, and within oneself nothing but a chill, unlighted loneliness, haunted by mocking ghosts of the dreams, ideals and beliefs one once

cherished—then one must do something, any desperate, hazardous thing that would leave one no time for thinking, hold one's nose with a compassionate relentlessness to the grindstone of realities . . . join the Foreign Legion . . . go to sea. . . . If you were one of the Gilbert Strouds of this world you went round the world on a luxury cruise, or went on Seeing-Europe tours. . . .

Stroud's Tours! There it was, staring him in the face, flaming red and yellow and blue from the poster hoarding. Palm trees, blue sea and sky, a yellow strand, a ship which looked as though it must be designed in white enamel, and the poetic poster caption, "A dream ship in the scented South," and in scarlet letters on the blue, "Stroud's Three Weeks' Cruises in Sunny Seas; fares from Fifty Guineas."

He stood staring at it, fascinated, and a fantastic thought leapt to life in his brain. He thrust it back with a sardonic counter-thought, but it lay there, a wild thing in a jungle of thought and tangled undergrowth of emotions, waiting the moment to spring.

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BLUE BLOOD

FROM the moment that Gilbert Stroud had set eyes on Isabel Merrill in her father's shabby house at Regent's Park he had known that his search was ended. She was all that he meant by exquisite as applied to women. That small golden head poised like a flower upon the slender neck, that tall, lithe body, narrowhipped, supple; small slim feet, long lovely hands; delicate nostrils; the small contemptuous mouth, eyes that kept their secrets behind grey-green veils; a cold, beautiful mask of a face, as the photograph he had seen had indicated—a rather scornful mask. That the only interest she evinced in Gilbert at their introduction was a faint disdain, as though he were a tradesman she was unexpectedly called upon to receive, was merely in his estimation an added point. He wanted her proud; with that beauty and that pedigree a superiority complex—to put it modernly—was indicated. Not that there was anything to equip a young and lovely woman with any such complex in the decayed gentility of that house in Regent's Park, or in having for a father the tenth Earl of Tringham. There was nothing whatever about his lordship that one could possibly either admire or like. He was disagreeable in the widest sense of the term, both in person and personality. Out of doors he was addicted to a long greasy overcoat in all weathers, and a shabby felt hat pulled down over his eyes; there was always scurf on his coat-collar, and he never took a taxi when a bus would do; he despised the people who toadied to him and insulted those who didn't. He had never forgiven his only child for not being a boy, and made no secret of his wish that she should marry money. His contempt for the *nouveau riche* and for post-war peerages was vitriolic in its intensity. He did not require that people should like him; he preferred that they should fear him. In his youth his sarcastic tongue had been acidly witty and amusing; now it was merely the sole remaining weapon of a spiteful, querulous old man. And yet he knew everyone and went everywhere, and because it was almost impossible to credit human nature with so much disagreeableness, people would say that his bark was worse than his bite, and that he was most amusing really, and secretly devoted to his daughter.

But it was the older generation who said this; the young generation, having no respect either for age or tradition, declared quite simply and candidly that he was a disagreeable old devil, and that Isabel must have a hell of a time of it, and the sooner she married money, a nice rich manufacturer or city magnate, the better; but that as she was twenty-five already she had better look sharp about it, because rich bachelors didn't go begging these days, particularly the 'passable' ones; and that really in these days there was no need to be so self-conscious about being an earl's daughter; it didn't cut any ice these days; nobody cared about titles since the war—there were too many of them—and even a peerage that went back as far as the Conquest, which the Tringham peerage didn't, was not much help when you had no money. And they pointed, these Bright Young People, these democratic children of the great god Jazz, to all the princesses and countesses shot out of Russia like a lot of garbage; and the moral of it all was that it was simply nothing nowadays to be blue-blooded when the popular shade in every department of the social organisation was revolution red.

But the Lady Isabel continued to remember, and by her cold, aloof dignity to force others to remember, in spite of the shabby house, the dilapidated castle, the hired-out shooting, and her scrofulous father, that she was a member of one of the oldest and most patrician families in the country. Under the impetus of the democratic spirit of the age, genuine pre-war peers might marry chorus girls, and pre-war peeresses run hat-shops, but the daughter of the tenth earl of Tringham would continue to sit in her Regent's Park tower like a modern Lady of Shalott until without loss of dignity she might rise up and go forth. This much the world gauged, but what went on behind those veiled eyes only the Lady Isabel herself knew. She had a great many acquaintances, people who called her 'darling' and pretended not to be afraid of her unpleasant father, insisting on treating him playfully and regarding his disagreeableness as no more than an exaggerated form of an old person's 'ragging'—a rather bad joke that had to be endured; but she had no friends, that is to say none who knew the secrets behind her eyes.

She rode, she hunted, she danced; she and her father were invariably 'amongst those seen' at first-nights; within the

inadequate limits of her allowance she entertained; she was always perfectly groomed and exquisitely dressed, and people conjectured as to her allowance and whether old Merrill was not better off than he permitted the world to know.

And Gilbert Stroud looked at her and wondered whether such a woman could be bought or whether she must be wooed. It was as difficult to think of love in connection with the Lady Isabel as in connection with a Greek statue, though it was true that statues had been made to come to life, warmed into humanity by the breath of adoring passion, according to the Galatean legend. . . .

He longed to take her away from the dingy Regent's Park house; she required a house which should be a setting for her beauty; it hurt him to see her step out of the fusty interiors of taxis; she should lie against grey velvet upholstery in a long sleek car, like a gem in its casket.

It was not at her invitation that Gilbert visited at her father's house and accompanied them to the houses of their friends, nor by her inclination that she and her father dined with the Strouds. Lord Merrill was determined not merely to do good business with John Stroud, but to marry young Stroud to his daughter. He had tried in turn to marry her to a newspaper magnate, a financier, a jockey, and a manufacturer of woven underwear. They had all been interested in acquiring sole rights in the lovely Lady Isabel, but Isabel was 'damned awkward,' and that was all there was to it. She declined the newspaper magnate and the financier as vulgar; the jockey as ridiculous; and the manufacturer as having a Lancashire accent, and the candidates themselves had been able to make no headway against her ladyship's aloofness.

"Cold, like her mother," was Merrill's private comment, and regretted this emancipation which allowed a woman to pick and choose in the matter of husbands instead of taking what her father arranged for her and being grateful. But he had great hopes concerning young Stroud. He could not be accused of being either vulgar or ridiculous; he was young and good-looking and dressed well; it was true he had an accent, but most people liked the colonial twang, and being a colonial exempted him from any necessity to account for his ancestry; it was enough to say that he came 'of the old stock,' whatever that might mean; being colonial might

cover a multitude of deficiencies; not that any were apparent, as far as Merrill could see; he considered him eminently eligible in every respect. You couldn't ever call the boy's father a self-made man, since he had inherited the business, and the boy would inherit it. And it was a reputable business, not like tinned goods or underwear. Some of quite the best people had shipping interests. True, you saw posters advertising Stroud's Tours everywhere since the floating of the new company; that was a pity if one thought of connecting up with the family; still, you couldn't have it every way, and it was not as though you were asked to fit Stroud's and be satisfied, or wear Stroud's and be tickled to death; it was a dignified business, shipping—not that dignity mattered to the tenth earl of Tringham, but Isabel was so like her mother, so damned squeamish. For himself he was prepared to fit anything or wear anything, eat more of anything, or take it on a sixpence with his morning tea, so long as there was any money in so doing. He despised profoundly the people who made their money by producing these things; he resented the fact that the tenth earl of Tringham must stoop to profit by their vulgarities, but he resented still more the lack of money, and the fact that he had never had enough of it distorted his sense of values, so that he no longer cared for money for what it would buy, but for the security from duns that it represented.

It had annoyed him intensely when his daughter had refused to give a series of at-homes at a popular hotel in order to demonstrate the newest thing in golfing pullovers for ladies—the Press, leaders of fashion, and various middle-class matrons to be sent gilt-edged invitation cards. The fee was handsome, and the public reading the pithy paragraphs in the various social gossip columns and man-about-town diaries of the dailies and weeklies would not know that it was an advertisement 'stunt'; they would be enchanted to read that Lord Merrill's beautiful daughter was wearing what promised to be the newest idea in jumpers or sweaters or cardigans or whatever it was. Isabel might have done a lot of this sort of thing to augment the family income, had she not been so damned squeamish. As it was, a musical-comedy lady who had married into the peerage obliged in that matter of golfing pullovers, gaining useful publicity and augmenting her dress allowance at one and the same time.

And there was the firm who had wanted Lady Isabel to lend her name to a new face cream, 'The Lady Isabel beauty outfit,' and the firm who wanted her to be photographed wearing their pearl beads, with the slogan, "'I always wear my Pseudo-Pearls,' says the beautiful Lady Isabel Merrill."

But the bitterest disappointment of all to the Earl of Tringham was when his daughter rejected a Sunday paper's proposal that she should sign a weekly dress article at fifty guineas a time and a six-months' contract. It made Lord Merrill's head ache when he thought of the money some people had to spend, and the way some people threw golden opportunities away out of squeamishness. Here he was lending his name to the board of every blessed little tinpot firm that came along and offered him two hundred a year for the privilege of using it on their stationery to impress their shareholders, and here was Isabel coolly turning down something like fifteen hundred pounds, not a penny of which she had to earn, simply because she considered certain ways of acquiring money vulgar.

Well, of course it was vulgar; having to scrounge a living was always vulgar; work would always be the curse of the thinking classes, but breeding could and did devulgarise earned increment. The mighty can stoop without loss of dignity; it is regrettable that they should have to do it, but it would be still more regrettable if they were not so allowed, for the rich must live, and it was only right that the rich should help the rich to earn their honest caviare.

So ridiculous to talk about being poor but honest; when you're poor, reflected the Earl of Tringham, you can scarcely help being honest, any more than a plain woman can help being virtuous.

He reflected a great many things like this as he slouched along Piccadilly, his overcoat, green with age, flapping in the wind. In his opinion most of our moral axioms wanted drastically overhauling before they were handed on to posterity. There was altogether too much sentiment about them and not enough sophistication. He mentally revised them, extracting a sardonic humour in the process.

It is better to have gambled and won than never to have gambled at all.

An impoverished peer gathers no credit.

Every overdraft has a vulgar lining.

And whenever he thought of the inadequacy of the old axioms he would invariably evolve a few of his own, such as that it usually takes a young woman to take the 'l' out of play, and a young man to take the 'i' out of poise; that what is custard in Balham is *crème-caramel* in Belgravia, and by no other name would taste as good.

And then telling himself that patricians may run where plebeians fear to tread, would clutch his disgraceful umbrella and dash off in pursuit of a passing bus.

TRINGHAM CASTLE

I

GILBERT STROUD was probably the only person who had ever come within reach of liking the tenth earl of Tringham. But unless the two things he regarded as approximately synonymous, admired is perhaps the more accurate word. He had a profound respect for his lordship's complete lack of anything approaching sentimentality, and his equally complete indifference to public opinion. He was a man who dared to lay himself open to dislike, who respected nobody and nothing, and who never for a moment permitted himself the vulgarity of being 'human.' It might be a colossal pose or super poise, but whichever it was he sustained it without respite or relapse. In his way he was a masterpiece of consistency.

If he had for a moment unbent towards him, Gilbert could not have respected him: from being a unique personality he would have degenerated into a spiteful and querulous old man. Merrill, for his part, did not concede that he liked young Stroud, because he did not permit himself to like—or was perhaps not capable of liking—anyone; but he tolerated him because he was the most eligible and likely person he had yet considered as a prospective son-in-law. He made no secret of his desire that Gilbert should marry his daughter. He discussed it with John Stroud, with Gilbert, and with Isabel herself. Isabel was the most difficult to discuss the matter with.

He said to her, "One of these days young Stroud will ask you to marry him. If you've any sense, you'll take him."

The Lady Isabel did not deign an answer. She went on cutting the pages of a new book.

"What have you against him?" Merrill's tone was exasperated.

She was aware of that exasperation in her father's voice.

"Nothing, except that he doesn't interest me."

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Most people consider that a little interest helps."

"Don't you want to be married?"

"I'd like to have my own house and a decent allowance."

"Young Stroud can give you both. The old man's richer, of course, but the youngster is more in your line. He's got looks, and he's only waiting to be encouraged."

"I don't want him. He is too young; and conceited. And I dislike his accent. I couldn't live with someone who said 'pretty nice' and pronounced can't to rhyme with ant."

"Oh, my God!" Merrill ran his fingers distractedly through his thin hair.

"What the devil does it matter about his accent? An accent hasn't any cash value."

"For that matter neither has love."

"Then for God's sake fall in love with him and put yourself right with your conscience!"

Distaste flickered for a moment in the green eyes. "The spirit bloweth where it listeth."

"Then it's time it took a list to where there's a decent bank balance! Look at Rex—he did pretty well for himself by marrying money."

"I prefer not to look at Rex. If you'd let me marry him at the time he wouldn't have gone to America and degraded himself."

There was a faint flush now upon the ivory mask.

"Degraded himself be damned! The girl was a millionairess."

"He would have married me for love."

"And kept you on love, I suppose? Not to mention himself."

"He had his allowance. We could have managed. People can when they love each other enough. I don't care what he's done since—loving me was the finest thing he ever did, and he knows it. He wouldn't have been content to be poor with anyone else—but with me, yes. And I with him."

"Love in a cottage and all that sort of thing, I suppose?"

"Not exactly. A villa in the South of France was what we had in mind, and a little flat in London. People have been known to manage on two thousand a year without actually suffering unbearably, you know."

"People have been known to manage on two hundred a year, but you don't suppose Rex regrets marrying two million, do you? The marriage has lasted pretty well. What is it—getting on for seven years, isn't it, and he and Poppy are still together."

"When people marry for money the marriage generally does last; it is more profitable to stay married. As to regret—what do we know what Rex regrets? You don't imagine he would say? Have you ever allowed anyone to know your regrets? His name is Merrill, too." She rose and put down the book. "It's time to dress. You'll remember that we're dining with the Pembridges."

She went out and Merrill prowled the room irritably. All that business of Isabel and Rex before the war. . . . Boy and girl romance, both of them under age. Hugo had been as much against it as he had; wanted a rich wife for his boy; up to his eyes in debts Hugo was, like all the Merrills, and none of them equipped for earning his living. Well, that wasn't their fault; no one in the family had worked for a living for over five hundred years. It didn't matter with the Merrill women—they could be always married off, but there was nothing for the Merrill men but to marry money; not that any of them had, until Rex; so far as could be discerned all the others had done was to marry prospects which hadn't materialised. It was a pity Isabel hadn't been his brother Hugo's daughter; he'd have liked Rex for a son—a direct heir to the title and money brought into the family where it most mattered, instead of going to the son of a younger son. All that was left to him was to marry his daughter profitably, not with any wild hope of retrieving the family fortunes—they were beyond retrieving; at this stage there was nothing to hope for but a slow, inevitable disintegration—but in order that their swan-song might be sung with some semblance of dignity.

It was his idea that the Strouds should spend Easter with them at Tringham Castle. The boy and Isabel could go riding together—hired horses, to be sure, but that wouldn't affect the scenery; nothing like a romantic setting for fostering the right atmosphere. Isabel might be less standoffish in the country; easier for Gilbert to be alone with her, too. He and Stroud senior would tolerate each other for the sake of the young people. They'd have no other guests—there was nothing for anyone to want to come to Tringham Castle for, anyhow—a draughty desolate ruin of a place with no modern conveniences—practically untouched for the last two hundred years; nothing to do there but get on a horse or in a car and get away from it. But a very suitable setting for the develop-

ment of a love-interest and a proposal of marriage. Besides, colonials liked these old historic places; it made them sentimental about the Mother Country and the stately homes of England; Stroud might like to buy the place.

Merrill was perfectly willing to sell it, complete or a brick at a time, to any one whose taste for antiquity was sufficiently well developed for him to overlook the fact that it stood in the middle of a draughty moor and was about as habitable as Melrose Abbey, and that very little of the original structure remained, because each generation of Merrills had not so much restored or rebuilt or demolished—using the historic stones for such purposes as paving paths or building outhouses, or filling up wells or making walls on estates which dwindled with every succeeding earl. But nobody wanted to buy a castle which had deteriorated into little more than a straggling manor-house whose historic interest was practically obliterated, and which even when demolished would not yield a desirable building plot. It photographed well in the illustrated weeklies, and that was about all you could say for it. The people who took it over for a season, for the hunting or shooting, got little satisfaction out of it save the privilege of seeing themselves reproduced in the illustrated papers grouped on the steps of Lord Merrill's ancestral home.

Only Isabel liked it or would have been grieved had it passed out of the family.

2

For Isabel Merrill, Tringham Castle was the most beautiful place in the world. Here were the trees she and Rex and little Anne had climbed together as children; the long ago dried-up moat where such engrossing games could be evolved; here the tangled wilderness of a garden where on summer nights the moonlight dripped like water from the giant burdock leaves—still they reached to one's knees, but then they had been deep mysterious jungles; here the neglected orchard where the wild flowers rioted in the long grass, and what Rex called 'cow's parsley', and she 'lady's laces', foamed in a cream froth against gnarled trunks.

All the suns of all the summers that had passed since then had not dried up the willow-hidden pond across which a tree-trunk

had fallen so that one might pass across with a delicious sense of peril. Once Rex had slipped, and they had not dared return until his clothes were dry, and they had tried to remove the mud from his shoes with burdock leaves, and had lain out in the moat where there was no shade, so that he might dry, and the hot sun had made Rex feel sick, so that they had gone back to the castle and Isabel had said that it was all her fault, that she had pushed Rex into the pond, and little Anne had been made to promise not to tell. She had rejoiced in the punishment that had been heaped upon her; it was doing something for Rex . . . and he had rewarded her afterwards by giving her his tortoise, only after two days of her ownership it crawled away into the burdock leaves and was never seen again in this world, although they organised a big game hunt in search of it. On that expedition Rex had been stung on his hand by a deadly rattlesnake of that burdock jungle—a stinging nettle—and had submitted to her binding a burdock leaf round his hand. All her memories seemed to be associated with doing things for Rex. He had said, as she bent over him, “Your hair smells like flowers,” and she had answered prosaically, “I expect it’s the scented soap Nanny washed it with,” but she remembered it like a happy song all day for months, for years after. “Your hair smells like flowers. . . .” She was grieved when he was sent away to school: playing with Anne somehow wasn’t the same.

Then her mother died, and she, too, went away to school. It was as though her playing days were over. But it was only the end of a phase. He had been sixteen when he had kissed her—it was in the orchard during their summer holidays from their respective public schools—and he had said, “I’ll never marry anyone but you. You’re so lovely,” and they had clung together, half frightened, half delirious, and life became a surging tumult, for all that the afternoon was so still that the humming of a bee and the darting of a blue dragon-fly above the motionless grasses were tremendous things.

When he was nineteen Rex announced to his father that he intended to be engaged to his cousin Isabel and to marry her when he came down from Oxford. Whereupon the Honourable Hugo Merrill carefully explained to his son that such an idea could not be countenanced; it was very important—it was, in fact, essential

—that both he and Isabel should marry money. He would find that his Uncle had very different plans for Isabel, added to which a marriage between first cousins was not in any case desirable.

It had seemed easy at nineteen to defy parental opposition; to remind each other that in two years' time they would be free to do as they liked. Free? Hugo Merrill withdrew his son from Oxford on the pretext of being unable to afford to keep him there. He was determined to save him from folly at all costs; it was clearly a case for some drastic remedy. He took him to America. But he was subtle in the handling of his son. He said, "If after six months away from Isabel you still feel the same about it, I'll agree to the engagement." In the meantime he stopped his allowance and introduced him to Poppy Ferrars, who thought it would be nice to have a real earl for an uncle.

Poppy had sex-appeal; floods and tides and cataracts and oceans of it; she was expert at the American art of petting; her collegiate methods made Rex feel positively kindergarten. Her passion was terrific, and Rex, all his senses quickened by his adolescent love for Isabel, was easy prey. There was nothing adolescent about Poppy's emotions; they were thousands of years old; he stayed in New York; he was engaged to Poppy, although he never quite knew how it happened; he was married to her, and the papers of two continents blazed the news, "Millionairess marries nephew of English peer." "Lord Merrill's nephew weds American girl millionairess. Young couple declare it purely a love-match."

Rex mentally shuddered to find himself referred to in bold type as 'a sprig of English nobility,' and his bride as 'daughter of the canned cantaloupe king.' Hugo Merrill chuckled; his brother smiled his sardonic smile; the sprig of English nobility's cousin did nothing; she made no comment; she had always been pale, and no one but Rex had ever seen her eyes anything but cold.

Six months later England entered the war and Rex came home and joined up. It was two years before he was sent overseas. His war career was neither brilliant nor particularly hazardous; perhaps it was not his fault; he had an amusing time in Paris and behind the lines; he did not much care what happened to him; he was prepared to go where he was sent, and if he was killed it meant he need not go back to Poppy; perhaps Fate is most kind

to those who fear her least. Rex remained on the headquarters staff behind the lines, and drove about in commandeered Rolls-Royces and amused himself as best he could, and was rather bored.

During that time Isabel allowed herself to be enrolled on various war-time committees and ran a canteen as it were by proxy. When it was all over she retired to Tringham Castle until Rex should have sailed with his wife to New York. There seemed to be no point in their meeting. It was quite obvious that Rex had to go back to Poppy; who else was to support him? All his leaves he had spent with Poppy in London, where she ran a large house and entertained as lavishly as though a world-war had never been heard of, organised concerts for the entertainment of British and American troops on leave, and held committee meetings to do with refugee relief funds in her spacious drawing-room. Whenever Rex came home on leave, Isabel contrived to be at Tringham Castle, and as Rex was equally anxious to avoid Isabel, they never met. Poppy and Isabel met frequently, and the former talked freely about Rex and her passion for him and his for her, and Isabel would listen with her face a white mask, and feel that as long as she did not have to meet Rex she could bear it. It was quite clear that in Poppy's eyes Rex was a hero, and that she was, as she said, 'just longing' to carry him off back to New York and parade him as such.

So when it was all over Poppy carried her hero off, and Isabel was not amongst those present who waved good-bye at Southampton. But she had a letter from Rex at Tringham Castle—the first in four years. Her father knew that she had this letter; he had seen the writing on the envelope and recognised it; he was present in the room when Isabel read it, and when she had read it she put it on the fire without re-reading it, and her face revealed nothing. He made no comment; let sleeping dogs lie, he thought; and there was the Atlantic between them. . . .

He never referred to the letter, and in due course the newspaper magnate, the financier, the jockey, and the manufacturer, were paraded before her in procession, and between them, scarcely counting, scarcely noticed by her, the inevitable young men one meets at parties, and who were attracted by her beauty and repelled by her aloofness.

And now she was twenty-five, and remained the chatelaine of a dilapidated castle in Scotland and a shabby house in London, and Gilbert Stroud looked at her with a flame in his eyes. Good-looking he was, but Rex had had a wild young Shelleyesque beauty; young, he was, but not as young as Rex; and grave, where Rex was always laughing, and in his eyes when the flame was not there was something which coolly appraised. He admired, with a cool critical appreciation, where Rex adored; he was conscious of all the details that went into the making of her beauty, but Rex had said, "You are lovely. . . . Your hair smells like flowers. . . ." Rex was weak and irresponsible; he wanted nothing so much in life as to have a good time with a minimum of exertion . . . but after more than four years of silence he had written her. They were of the same blood, and all the rest were outsiders. They had their loyalties, these Merrills, nor could it seem inconsistent to them to betray the whole world in support of them. . . .

Yet sooner or later, she knew, she would follow in Rex's footsteps and marry money in the form of Gilbert Stroud as he had married it in the form of Poppy Ferrars, propelled into that path by the same relentless social order that had made them what they were and kept them so. Sooner or later Gilbert Stroud would ask her to marry him, and sooner or later she would accept him.

But not here at Tringham Castle, where the burdocks grew as they always did, and the lady's laces foamed under the same apple trees—those apple trees that long ago had given up bearing fruit, as though they were tainted by the same blight of sterility and decadence that had been for generations slowly but steadily creeping upon their owners.

PROPOSAL

IT seemed ridiculous to Gilbert that since Merrill was perfectly aware that he wished to marry his daughter, was anxious that he should do so, and had undoubtedly discussed the matter with her, so that she too would be perfectly aware of his desire, he should be called upon to sustain the farce of courtship. It was as embarrassing for both of them as it was absurd, he thought. He had no desire to rush the Lady Isabel into an engagement before she had had time to make up her mind, but at least there ought to be no reason for not being frank and dispensing with the usual wooing tactics.

At the last moment it had seemed to him absurd to go off with Stemway for the week-end when he had been invited to Tringham Castle, which was obviously the ideal place in which to lay his proposal before her, since there they could scarcely avoid being left a good deal alone with each other, whether they wished it or not. If he backed out of that opportunity, he thought, he might not get another. It was all very well being high-handed when one was reasonably sure of success, but he was not at all sure of the Lady Isabel—certainly not sure enough at this stage to risk offending her. He knew that so far as her emotions were concerned she would not care whether he accepted the invitation or not, but she was arrogant, and one does not lightly turn down the invitations of the Lady Isabels of this world. . . .

At Tringham Castle sheer boredom might make her glad of his society, and there would be no distractions, no chance of the telephone ringing or people calling and affording her an excuse for postponing her answer. He felt that he simply could not afford not to fulfil his promise to spend Easter at Tringham Castle, and that he had been an impulsive fool to suggest to Stemway that he might back out of it at the last minute like that. The mere fact that Stemway had made the long journey from Rome specially to see him made upon him an impossible emotional demand, placed him in a false position. When people made such demands upon one it was their own fault when one let them down. Away from the spell of Stemway's personality it was easy to reason like this—even to work up a spurious resentment against him, as a sop to conscience.

At Tringham Castle, he reasoned, Isabel would be at his mercy;

she would have to listen to him and have to answer. He had no desire to stage the scene romantically; he merely wished to be safe from interruption.

The Merrills were already established when he arrived, with their servants transported from their London house.

Isabel greeted him with a chilly graciousness, inquired formally as to what sort of journey he had had, and hoped he would not be too bored.

"There's absolutely nothing to do," she said discouragingly.

Gilbert, however, felt that there was everything to do. Moreover, the Border country enchanted him. He found himself wishing that Mary was there. She would enjoy that keen air and those broad dun moors. John Stroud thought that the place might have been made tolerable if there had been a few women about other than the servants. As it was there was nothing to do but sit about with old Merrill and drink rather an inferior port and play chess in the intervals of talking business. He would have gone riding had there been anyone to ride with, but it was important that Gilbert and Isabel should be left to find their amusement together. He watched them ride off together regretfully, but told himself philosophically that if Gilbert achieved his end with the young woman the week-end, however boring, would not have been wasted, and, if Gilbert couldn't get engaged in this romantic setting then he never would, and if he made a mess of it he was darned if he, John Stroud, didn't have a shot at getting engaged to an earl's daughter himself!

Gilbert himself believed that in the country Isabel might be a little more 'human' and approachable, but curiously she seemed more aloof than ever. His attempts to break through that unrelenting reserve led nowhere, and he began to wonder whether there was anything to break through to, whether that apparently complete detachment from normal interests and emotions which characterised her father was not also the substance of her own mental make-up.

"You're an odd person, you know," he said to her once; "one never really gets to know you."

"Perhaps," she suggested, with her cold smile, "there isn't anything to get to know."

"One presumes you have your reactions to life like the rest of us. You must have your dreams, your emotions."

"Not necessarily."

"Are you super-human, then? Or sub-human?" His voice was bitter.

"Whichever you like."

Hers was mocking. He gave up the effort. Always, it seemed to him, his efforts to follow into the labyrinthine ways of her hidden soul and mind led him into a cul-de-sac like that. Sometimes he thought that even if he rode and walked and talked and dined and sat about with her every day for the rest of his life, he would never know her any better.

Yet in the hope of stumbling upon a clue to her personality he deferred asking her to marry him until the day before he was due to return to London. There persisted in him the hope that she might afford him an opening.

Finally, he asked her on the walk back from the village after their morning ride. He said, casually, as they turned into the drive under a crumbling Gothic arch, "You know, of course, that I want to marry you." He reflected dispassionately that she had the entire length of the grounds in which to consider the matter and discuss it, if discussion were necessary.

"My father seems to think so." Her voice was disinterested.

"He is perfectly correct. Do you like me well enough?"

"I hadn't thought about you." She flicked with her riding-crop at the burdock leaves rioting under the uncared-for trees as she passed.

Gilbert was irritated. "That's absurd. You can't help thinking about people you go about with. Don't pose. Why can't you be frank?"

"I am. I don't think about people. I accept them when I have to and ignore them when I don't. My father is like that."

Exasperated by her bored voice, her contemptuous smile, he seized her wrists, forcing her to stand still, to face him.

"People may bore you, but all this pose bores me. Nobody is inhuman—we're all human—only some more so than others. Will you marry me?"

"You're hurting my wrists."

"I'm not." But he released them though he did not move from his position which hemmed her in between him and the tree-trunk against which she leaned.

"I haven't one to give."

"Haven't one to give? Good God, surely you know whether you want to marry me or not, don't you?"

"Yes, I know; but I don't know yet whether I will or not. What I want to do has nothing to do with it. You wanted frankness."

She stood there, cool, mocking, trim in her riding habit, her head thrown back revealing the long lovely line of her throat. He looked at her and a tide of hatred surged up in him. He could have seized that slender, fragile throat and spent his male strength on it. The insolence of her, the untouchableness. . . .

With an effort he damned that surging tide and said in a voice that his anger made unsteady, "Have you any idea how long it will take you to reach a decision?"

"Not the slightest." Her smile maddened him.

He asked savagely, "How often, on an average, would you like me to reopen the subject?"

"You needn't trouble; when I am ready I will reopen it myself."

"And if by then I have found somebody else?"

"That will be fortunate for both of us, perhaps."

His anger collapsed in despair. He moved away from her and they walked on. When they came within sight of the castle round a bend of the drive, he realised that this might be the last opportunity they would have to be alone together and that he had made no headway.

He pleaded, "But, Isabel, you must realise that we can't go on going about together without being engaged. Let us at least announce our engagement—you can easily break it off if you finally decide that you can't go through with it."

"We don't need to go on going about together."

He stared at her, aghast at her callousness.

"Do you dislike me so much?" His voice was a little piteous. She did not even look up. "I don't dislike you."

"But you don't like me?"

"I don't think about you, I tell you. This discussion is beginning to bore me."

At that Gilbert lost control of his temper. "It's a lie to say you don't think about me," he cried, "you can't help thinking about me—knowing that I want to marry you. It's just a colossal pose, like your father's. You like to hurt people, both of you, because you despise everyone." His scar was throbbing furiously; his head felt tight, as though it would burst. "Well, I despise women, and have a contempt for titles, so we're quits, I guess."

She looked up at that. Her face was amused. "This is more interesting. What do you want with me, then, may I ask? On top of that you'll hardly say you love me."

He wanted to say, "I want you because you are exquisite, beautiful; all that I've ever wanted in a woman."

But he was aware of the mockery in her cool green eyes, and the amused contempt of her smile.

He was beside himself with fury as he flung at her, "I want you because I prefer to breed from good stock, if you must know!" He turned and strode away with an overwhelming sense of disaster.

He walked blindly, without looking back. And yet throbbing under all the seas of disaster in which he drowned was a sense of triumph. He might have defeated his own ends, yet he had scored. It was the insult *par excellence* to which she could not retort without adding to her humiliation. He had got even with her, that cold, scornful untouchable. He was glad of that, even if it meant the sacrifice of his objective. He hated her with a passion of impotent anger and frustrated desire.

It was impossible to go back to the house for luncheon, he told himself, to sit there in that great hall of a dining-room opposite her, meeting the cold hatred of her eyes, the questioning in his father's, the comprehending cynicism in Merrill's. God, what a mess he'd made of things! To have said that to her! What woman could forgive a man that?

But it was true though, by God, it was true! Something in him exulted a moment, then collapsed under the invading sense of disaster.

He came to a wilderness of weeds and rubbish-heaps beyond the disused paddock, and sat down wearily on a low broken wall, scowling, flicking at the nettles with his whip. He tried to collect

his thoughts out of the turmoil of emotion. Nothing for it but to return to Town. Get away without meeting any of them. He would have to apologise sometime, he supposed—not that it would do much good. And then something rose up in him defiantly—supposing he didn't apologise? Supposing he ignored the episode and came again to her later on and asked her to marry him. She might refuse—she undoubtedly would; he thought—but it would be a gesture that would establish him once and for all as her equal in arrogance. She might insult him, but nothing she could say could touch his pride as he had touched hers; she might ignore him, refuse to see him, but that would not eradicate the sting of his words. She might even respect him a little for the sheer insolence of his arrogance; by apologising he would not merely lose his self-respect but definitely surrender to the force of her pride—as certainly as by ignoring the episode he would at least reduce it to impotence, if not actually defeat it.

He rose and retraced his steps towards the house with a vague idea of sending a message by one of the servants. He came upon the gardener-cum-handyman and instructed him to take a message up to her ladyship that Mr. Gilbert Stroud regretted that he had to return to London immediately and would not be in for luncheon. That, too, he reflected, would make Isabel furious, receiving a message like that from a wondering servant—or were Merrill servants trained not to wonder?

He lunched at the village inn and caught an afternoon train to Newcastle, loathing the train's leisurely crawl through the Cheviots. He supposed that it was absurd to be travelling to London in riding kit, but so long as he got there in the minimum of time he did not care. He wanted Mary, desperately. He sent her a telegram from Newcastle. The first thing he did when he arrived at Euston was to rush to a telephone box and 'phone her; he felt that he would not be able to bear it if he was told there was no reply. He could have wept with relief when her laughing voice came to him over the wire. He had never had a more urgent need of her. Half an hour later she was in his arms, and he wanted to cry out with the joy, the blessed relief, of being with this warm human creature who was a fire to his blood and a balm to his spirit. The precious warmth of her lips; the blessed coolness of her hands. . . .

“ Mary,” he cried, “ I don’t know how I ever got along in life without you! How is it that I don’t want to marry you, you dear thing? ”

She smiled, sorrowfully, “ Because you know me too well, I suppose.”

She listened whilst he held her in his arms and told her of that day’s disaster. His head was heavy on her breast, his hands clung to her as though he would never let her go, as though she were his refuge and strength . . . the while he talked to her of another woman.

XXII

DISPOSAL

I

GILBERT'S reactionary tenderness with Mary did not last. He visited her evening after evening, and sometimes she wondered why he came, unless it were for a savage sadistic joy in quarrelling with her. That subconscious desire to get back on women which had caused him to annoy the matron and the housemaids at his boarding-school, came out again in a hundred petty ways. After he had left her Mary would marvel that such little things should have such power to fray her nerves and mentally and spiritually exhaust her as they did; but it was not each separate irritant of itself so much as the accumulated effect of Gilbert's persistence in them. And Gilbert would know that he was behaving badly, but it was as though there was some driving force which goaded him on. At no period had he had a more urgent need of Mary's friendship and understanding, and the conflict in himself exhausted him as it did her.

She would try to laugh him back to normality. She would say, "Gilbert, if you don't stop ragging me we shall end up by quarrelling."

And he would answer, "I'm not ragging. I mean it."

Or, arriving at the flat in a bad humour, he would project on to her and accuse her of sulking. Or do all the things he knew must annoy her, such as complaining of the cigarette smoke in her sitting-room, opening the windows ostentatiously, and laughing when her papers flew all over the room, and leaving her to gather them up. He would arrive when she was busy and tell her to carry on, and then make it quite impossible for her to do so by wandering restlessly about the room, putting on the gramophone, asking her incessantly if she wasn't 'nearly through,' and when her taut nerves gave way, accusing her of not being glad to see him. He would want to make love to her when she was tired and worn out, and when she made excuses gently, accuse her of coldness and indifference and create an utterly impossible atmosphere, the responsibility of which he would later project on to her.

When she was alone Mary would tell herself that it was stupid to let herself be defeated by these small torments which would

sound absurd if one tried to define them to anyone, but they exhausted her; they were like a swarm of flies buzzing about her and giving her no peace. Invariably when Gilbert left her in those days since his visit to Tringham Castle she would have a violent headache and a sense of extreme weariness. There were times when she marvelled at her own patience and powers of spiritual endurance.

But she could endure this conduct from Gilbert, in spite of the drain it made on her nervous system, because she understood what was wrong with him better than he understood it himself. She knew that he revenged himself on Isabel Merrill through her, in the way that exhausted mothers, irritated by life in general, will vent their resentment by shaking or slapping some bewildered, unfortunate child. She knew that when he kissed her it was this other woman that he embraced in spirit; that he had to be cruel to her because he resented having to deceive himself, and because she was not Isabel. It went deeper than this, too, had its roots in his childhood. When he achieved Isabel Merrill, if he ever did, he must use her as the instrument by which he revenged himself on all women, and for all that she was doing to him now by her contempt of him. His frustration in connection with her was the excuse that his semi-consciousness made to his subconsciousness; it was so much added fuel to a fire that in any case was inextinguishable.

She knew this because it was her job in life to understand the queer, twisted turnings and cul-de-sacs of the dark, lesser-known tracts of the human soul. She knew that he hurt himself by hurting her, that he pressed hard upon the hurt, relishing it, using one pain as an anæsthetic against the other. Her heart ached for him, but the evenings that he missed coming to her were a relief.

Nearly a fortnight after the disastrous Tringham Castle visit he telephoned her whilst she was still having her breakfast.

"Have you seen to-day's *Times* under engagements announced?" he demanded excitedly. Mary replied that she only read the vulgar Press.

He snapped at her, "Don't be funny. I'm serious. Listen. The engagement is announced between the Lady Isabel Merrill, the only daughter of the Earl of Tringham, and Mr. Gilbert

Stroud, only son of Mr. John Stroud, of Montreal." Gilbert's nervous excited laugh came to her over the wire. "Only known son it should have read."

"You asked her again, then?"

"No. I don't know anything about it. A marked copy of the *Times* was sent round to me by hand this morning. She must have sent it."

"It's a unique way of accepting a proposal, anyhow. You don't suppose there's any mistake?"

"No—she said she would let me know in her own time."

"What shall you do?"

"Write and congratulate her on her engagement and say that I consider both parties extremely fortunate. If we're dealing in gestures I'm pretty good at them myself. After that I shall ring her up and ask her if she will lunch with me and come and choose the engagement ring."

"It's an original way of getting engaged, anyhow," Mary said, and for the life of her could not get a note of brightness into her voice.

She heard his happy laugh. "I knew I was right not to apologise for that Tringham Castle episode," he said.

Mary wondered, wistfully, as she hung up the receiver, how long it would be before she saw him again.

2

Gilbert had his brief note of congratulation sent round to Isabel by hand that morning, and with it a huge sheaf of the most expensive red roses Bond Street could yield.

In the afternoon she telephoned him. She said in her cool clear voice, "Thank you for your charming letter and the flowers."

He answered, "Thank *you*—for the honour and the glory. Will you lunch with me to-morrow? We have to see about a ring, you know."

Only Cartier's, he thought, would have something suitable. Suitable? What was suitable, unless it be the morning star plucked from the firmament and tastefully set in white gold with a design of dollars rampant?

He heard her answering him, "Yes, of course. Shall we lunch at Claridge's at one o'clock? Does that suit you?"

"Splendidly, thanks."

"Very well. Good-bye for now."

She had rung off before he had time to say good-bye. He hung up the receiver with quivering nerves. He was engaged—and to the woman of his most exacting choice. The chosen orchid had been selected and set aside against the time of plucking; the morning star was booked to him. This afternoon he would pay the first instalment of the purchase price.

That night, to Mary's intense surprise, he took her to dinner. She had never seen him in such high spirits.

"I'm so happy, Mary," he cried, "you simply must be happy with me!"

And when he was unhappy, she thought, she must be unhappy with him; and what was going on in her own life did not matter; it was mowed down by the superb egotism that saturated his own life.

"Can you get along without love, Gilbert?" she asked him that night.

"Comfortably, Mary, much more comfortably without than with."

"A life without love in it is rather like a house without a fire, don't you think?"

He returned cheerfully, "There's always central heating—so much more satisfactory."

He did not suggest staying with her that night. It was not on any principle in connection with his engagement, she thought. It was merely that it did not occur to him—he was too much engrossed in his immediate future. She had no part in the upward sweep of his life, that gathering of egotism-actuated forces that made of his life a swift, unstemmable crescendo.

There was no doubt, she thought, that the victory was to the strong, and that the strong were the egotists. Life had no patience with altruism; it left it to the valiant undefeatable defeated. . . .

3

Gilbert had gone along that morning to keep his appointment with Isabel with a conflicting sense of triumph and hostility; triumph because he was achieving his end, and hostility because

of the lofty gesture with which she was making it possible. But when she entered the lounge where he waited, that hostility was pressed into the background by her beauty. There surged in him afresh the realisation that she was feminine perfection, delicate and exquisite as a magnolia flower. She was immaculate in her beauty. The close-fitting black hat revealed the faultlessness of her features, the utterly 'right' black dress, the slender, exquisite grace of her body. His heart thrilled when he looked at her.

She gave him her hand and smiled her mechanical frozen smile. He was aware of a faint, fugitive perfume as she moved by his side.

He had arranged for a spray of superb orchids to be laid on her plate at the table he had reserved. He observed that there was more warmth in the smile of pleasure she bestowed on them than there had been in her greeting to him.

He watched her whilst she pinned the flowers to her dress. How beautiful her wrists were in the long tight sleeves! And the beauty of her slender, unringed hands. He felt that he could never watch her enough, never absorb enough of the rare beauty of her; her every movement fascinated him; he loved the poise of her head, the line of the delicate throat. And presently that lovely throat would be his to do with as he willed, to caress with his lips or bruise with relentless possessive fingers. . . . His eyes rested on her like flames. He said suddenly, surprising himself, "If only you cared for me a little, Isabel!"

Her eyes mocked him. They were coldly green, like the colours in that iceberg he had seen coming over from Quebec. . . .

"I am going to marry you. Isn't that enough?"

"If you only cared a little it would be so much more wonderful. God knows why you're going to do it."

"I know, too."

"Why? Tell me." He was aflame with the urgency of his desire to know this strange woman who never seemed to come alive.

"Doesn't it ever occur to you that you are very rich?"

"You aren't the kind that marries money; you're too proud."

"Perhaps. Need we go into it? You want me to marry you. I have consented. It's not a case of my not reciprocating your love; you've never even pretended to love me."

"A man doesn't love beauty—he worships it. What is love,

anyhow? Nothing but sex instincts decked out by civilisation to look pretty. You don't want that."

She answered quietly, "No, I don't want that. Do you mind if we don't talk about it?"

It was hopeless, he thought, trying to get these Merrills off their glacial heights and bring them down to warm human levels. Perhaps by playing this inhuman pose for so long their humanity had actually atrophied. . . .

Isabel told him of the play she had been to the night before; they talked theatres, current novels, personalities. It seemed to him incredible that she had promised to marry him.

After luncheon they drove to Cartier's and selected a diamond, perfect as herself, mounted in platinum. He placed the ring on her finger and kissed her finger-tips. She accepted his suggestion that they should go to his flat for tea. He wanted to be quite alone with her, to savour the luxury of the realisation that she had pledged herself to him. She had never been at the flat with him alone before, and a sense of intimacy pressed about him as he took her furs from her, added another cushion to the already over-cushioned corner of the couch where she seated herself.

He sat down opposite her, reached forward, took her hands.

"I was beastly to you at Tringham Castle," he said a little unsteadily. "Do you forgive me?" He could apologise without loss of dignity now that she wore his ring. There was, besides, an emotional need to apologise, which surprised him.

"I had forgotten it." Her voice was disinterested.

His hands tightened upon hers; he could have shaken her; his tenderness melted in exasperation.

"Isabel, why do you pretend? You can't have forgotten. A woman can't forget an insult like that. You can't pretend you didn't think about me after I'd left, or why did you send the notice of our engagement to the papers?"

"I didn't; my father sent it."

"But you must have acquiesced in it."

"Yes, I acquiesced."

"Still hating me from that insult?"

"I don't hate people; they never mean enough to me."

He heard the bored weariness in her voice and dropped her

hands. She went on looking out of the window. The diamond of her engagement-ring flashed in the afternoon sunlight.

He lit a cigarette with unsteady fingers. Isabel did not smoke. He said, "I don't understand you."

"Does anybody ever understand anyone?"

"They understand a little, anyhow."

"They think they do."

She rose and crossed over to the piano and sat down and played a sort of post-impressionist tango by Albenitz-Godowski.

Tea was brought in, and she ceased playing and reseated herself by the window. She said, lifting the pseudo silver teapot that was part of the equipment of the service flat, "I will give a luncheon party next week, then you can meet all my friends and get it over. Is there anyone you would like to invite?"

"Yes. I'd like you to meet my novelist friend, Mary Thane.

"I've never heard of her."

"Quite a lot of people have. You don't read many novels."

"You don't have to read their books in order to have heard of people. It's much more important to authors to have people know about them than read their books. There are all sorts of people who write books that go into several editions, so that presumably some people read them, quite a lot of people, as you would say, but nobody has ever heard of them all the same."

He answered drily, "It depends what you mean by 'nobody.' Mary Thane is a charming and intelligent woman, and she has a masculine mind. Her books aren't lady-like and teeming with womanliness and sex. She isn't that dreadful thing 'a lady novelist.' She is my best friend—my only friend in this country, and I'm very fond of her. I'd like you to be nice to her."

"Why do you want her to meet me? To see if she approves?"

"Don't be absurd. I've told her about you and how much I wanted to marry you. Naturally, she would be interested."

"As though I were a sort of curio you'd been saving up a long time to buy and now want to show off? But am I supposed to be interested in her?"

"She's my friend, so I see no reason why you shouldn't be—and every reason why you should." He could not keep the irritation out of his voice.

"As you wish. You will be called upon to meet my relations—all of them, in fact. But there are only four of them—we're a dying race. We don't know my mother's people since she died. They consider that she died of Merrill tyranny. There wasn't much friendliness even during her lifetime."

"Who are the relations, then?"

"My father's brother and my aunt, and my cousins, Rex and Anne. And Rex's wife—but she's a relation-in-law and doesn't count when you talk of relations. She's American. I haven't seen her since they went back to New York soon after the Armistice—and I haven't seen Rex for years. They are due to arrive next week—on their way to Le Touquet and the Lido. I thought we might as well give the luncheon whilst they're here. Next Thursday I think it should be. . . . I prefer to make it a luncheon—you haven't to amuse people afterwards; they go away. Your writer friend won't go writing any silly gossip paragraphs for the papers, will she? There will be a young man there who is expert at it, and one's enough."

"Too many, I should say! But Mary doesn't do that sort of thing. She's literary."

She smiled. "A lady?"

"What on earth do you mean, Isabel? She's charming and intelligent and cultured—I don't know anything about her family. What on earth does it matter?"

"It doesn't, only so few literary people are presentable, are they? Generally a little odd, don't you think?"

Odd. The word she had used about Stemway. Would she think Mary odd, too, because she was not one of the exquisite people, the lilies of the field? Him, too, then, she must think odd, with his colonial accent, his name flaming in advertisement, 'Stroud's Tours, Ltd.' Queer that after a world-war, and when everyone talked so much about democracy, there should still persist this social snobbery. And queer that between him and Isabel there should be this persistent hostility. He struggled against it.

He said, smiling, "Now that we've settled your luncheon party, let us settle something still more important. When would you like the wedding, and where, and where would you like to go for a honeymoon?"

"Need we discuss all that now?"

"It has to be discussed sometime. Where do you want to live when we're married?"

"In London, of course. I'll find the house, and when I've found what I want we can arrange everything else."

"You'll begin looking right away?" he urged.

"Yes. I must go now." She rose.

"You will dine with me to-night?"

"No. I will see you next Thursday. Let me know whether your friend will come. Good-bye."

He accepted the ukase unquestioningly. She gave him her hand, and at its touch there was a warring of emotions in his blood.

"You're so beautiful," he cried, "and so cold. You're going to marry me, and yet you treat me as though I were a mere acquaintance! Would it bore you so very much to kiss me?"

He saw the expression of distaste on her face and dropped her hand. It was hopeless—hopeless. Desire died in him. She was colder than ice. Even ice would melt a little at his touch. His whole being trembled suddenly in the grip of a futile, despairing rage.

He heard her cool voice as she drew on her gloves. "Kissing is not an essential part of adoration, is it?"

His own voice when he answered was thick with mingled humiliation and misery.

"You are probably quite right. I'll come down in the lift with you."

"There's no need. I will expect you and Miss Thane on Thursday at one. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He bowed stiffly, opened the door for her, and she was gone.

He strode over to the window, his hands thrust into his pockets, scowling at the sunlit street. He supposed that he might as well go to the office. He turned and saw that the cushions where she had sat still held the imprint of her body. Despair consumed him. He dropped down wearily and buried his face amongst those cushions still warm from the touch of her. Something told him that it was all the warmth of her he would ever know.

LILIES OF THE FIELD

MARY THANE arrived at Lady Isabel Merrill's luncheon party in a mood fluctuating between nervousness and cynicism. She knew these luncheon parties of the exquisite people, these parties at which you stand about aimlessly, are introduced to people who do not interest you and who have even less interest in you, have to indulge in the intimate performance of eating strange foods flanked by complete strangers, and stand about afterwards balancing your coffee-cup, humming with sheer boredom, or submitting to the mental assault and battery of anyone who likes to enter into conversation with you, whilst you wonder until your head aches how you can make a quiet get-away unnoticed, the departure being an even more difficult ordeal than the arriving.

Always at these parties she would find herself mutely wondering why. Why mustn't a butler permit himself to smile? Why must a woman who has been in the house all the morning solemnly go into a bedroom and put on a hat before she can receive her luncheon guests? Why if one arrives at a luncheon or tea-party in a tight hat may one not tear the wretched thing off and be comfortable? Why must one stand about with cocktails and with coffee? What was there against sitting down? Why at receptions must one apologetically confide one's name to a scornful footman for him to thunder across the room? And why have receptions at all? Why have more servants than there are residents in the house? Why need it take seven people to minister to the daily requirements of two? Why was 'napkin' right and 'serviette' wrong? Why must one say 'How d'you do?' when no one replies to the question or is expected to reply. But that was how it went, always. "Miss Thane, may I present—or introduce—Lady Whatnot, Lord Dolittle, Miss Thingummy," and the chorus, "How d'you do, how d'you do, how d'you do." The futility of it! It had the nightmare quality of *The Beggar on Horseback*, with footmen springing up from behind myriads of marble pillars, and the chant of all the ushers at the wedding:

"Pleased to meet you

How d'ye do?"

"Pleased to meet you,

How d'you do?"

An endless, rhythmic chant. But what else could one say? "Hullo, I've heard about you!"—that might sound sinister. Or one might be coy and murmur, "Fancy that!" or supercilious and cry, "Good gracious!" Perhaps it was as well to keep to the formula. But it would be more to the point if when they asked you how you did you told them—well or badly, or not at all, as the case might be. There was sense after all in what they taught you to say as a child to those formal queries. "Quite well, thank you," you said, hating the inquirer and wriggling as you replied.

"How are you?" Mary's mother's friends said, heartily, when they were introduced, and they shook hands and said, "Pleased to meet you," and usually they meant it. They liked to meet people; they didn't do it as a rather boring social duty, as did these exquisite people. It was better that way, surely? Better to enjoy shrimps for high tea than not to enjoy caviare for evening dinner.

It was with these reflections concerning conduct and caviare, diet and dialectics, epicures and epigrams, that Mary entered the dingy house in Regent's Park to set eyes for the first time on Gilbert Stroud's orchidaceous lady.

She followed the inevitable dehumanised butler up the stairs and into a large crowded room. With that peculiar sinking feeling that always assailed her upon these occasions, she heard her name announced, and then she was moving blindly forward towards that mass-formation of people which constitutes a party. A tall slender figure in pale green with a swathe of golden tissue for a hat detached itself from the mass and came forward.

A voice as cool as the hand that touched hers for a moment said, "So nice of you to come. May I introduce you to——" And then the string of names that one never catches at such introductions, and the perfunctory smiles and how-d'ye-do's.

"Gilbert is not here yet," said the cool voice. "Cyril, give Miss Thane a cocktail."

Cyril was a tall, blonde, loosely built young man with fair eyelashes. He wore a brown suit with a pink carnation, and was working hard twisting oranges on a glass cone and pouring the juice so obtained into a large glass jug already half-full of a bilious-looking liquid.

He smiled at Mary pleasantly and asked, "What will you have, Eunuch's Dream or Monkey Gland?"

"What's the difference?"

"The absinth that is alleged to make the heart grow fonder."

"I'll have the one without it."

He poured some of the liquid into a glass. "Here's your poison."

He glanced about the room. "Any more orders, please? Walk up, walk up, one touch of absinth makes the whole world spin."

Mary took her glass and moved away. It was clear that Cyril was a life-and-soul-of-the-party. She looked about the room. Who was everybody? How they talked! So that was the orchid lady? She was very beautiful. But what was she like, really? It was one of those inscrutable faces. The cold eyes, the thin mouth. . . . Was this what Gilbert wanted?

Then she saw Gilbert standing by the mantelpiece talking earnestly to a gaunt sardonic-looking old man in incredibly shabby tweeds. She went over to him.

Gilbert was saying, vehemently, "It can be done, and we'll do it. We've got a quarter of a million behind us—pounds not dollars—and with your name on the prospectus——" He broke off as Mary approached, and his eyes lit up.

"My dear! Let me introduce you—Lord Merrill—Miss Mary Thane——"

Merrill nodded curtly. "We'll go into it later," he said shortly to Gilbert, and moved away.

Gilbert turned to Mary. "I'm so glad you came. Have you been introduced to everyone?"

"It feels like it. But I don't know a bit who everyone is. Who, for instance, is Cyril?"

"Cyril Bathwick? One of the things you can't escape at parties."

"What does he do, I mean?"

"Do? Giddy young things of fifty, mostly. There's his present employer over there by the door."

Mary glanced in the direction he indicated and saw the sort of woman who has to be seen to be realised; a caricature of a woman; fifty-five and making frantic, pitiful efforts to look like thirty-five;

over-jewelled, over-rouged, under-dressed. She wore an enormous hat heavy with feathers, and the lobes of her ears dripped diamonds. The great painted face sagged, the diamonds glittered, the feathers swayed, the heavily darkened eyes coquetted.

Mary murmured, aghast, "She's like something by Beardsley or Norman Lindsay. Utterly obscene. What does he see in her?"

Gilbert shrugged. "Twenty thousand a year, I imagine."

"But why is she here in this house? She's so dreadful. Don't they all see how dreadful she is?"

"My dear, nobody with that income is dreadful. They all know she's obscene and vulgar and corrupt, a female Regency rake, a tragic wreck of the naughty nineties, and all the rest of it, but she's rich and she counts for something in society, and that's all there is to it. She imagines herself a beauty, and always goes to fancy-dress parties as a madonna or a nun—nobody knows whether she does it out of sheer bawdry or because she sees herself as a sort of second Diana Duff-Cooper. That's an interesting woman coming in now, though. The one with the man's suiting and the monocle. Used to be on the musical comedy stage and now runs a stockbroking office in the city. The fellow talking to Isabel now is either the young hope or the last hope of the Liberal Party, according to your political point of view. A Jew, of course; they appear to have the monopoly of brains in this country. There's the young surgeon Orpen painted last year—he's removed all the best appendixes in English society, I believe."

He broke off as Isabel came up to him. "Gilbert—Rex and Poppy have arrived."

She bore him away, and Mary was left marooned by the mantel-piece. Close to her she could hear the ex-musical comedy stockbroker inquiring in a loud voice as to whether one could invite a certain coloured actor, very popular with the English theatre-going public just then, to a house-party.

"Could one?" she demanded, plaintively, in the tone of one who would never dream of doing something one couldn't do.

The Member of Parliament was of the opinion that one could. "The negroes," he declared, "are a more civilised people than the whites. And if a man is a great artist does it matter whether he is nigger-brown or Picasso pink?"

The quondam theatrical lady replied that that was all very well, but if there were a lot of young girls in the party . . .

"True," murmured the young Liberal, thoughtfully, "they might seduce your coloured gentleman."

The stockbroking lady tossed her head. "You know perfectly well what I mean. I remember when I was in Cairo, there was an English girl going about with an Egyptian, and she was cut by the whole British community."

"That must have been very nice for her," Mary said suddenly, so intent upon the conversation that she had forgotten she was not included in it.

The monocled one walked away. The young Jew came up to Mary. His eyes twinkled.

"Why is it that parties always brings out the worst in one?" he laughed.

Mary flushed. "Frightfully rude of me to butt in like that, I know," she admitted, "but it always bores me so much, this business of the people one can and cannot know."

"I know." She thought the drawled, nasal inflection in his voice charming. "And it's true about the coloured peoples. They have the monopoly of culture."

Mary said pointedly, "Have they? I thought the Jews had."

He laughed. "All the despised races, perhaps. They thrive on opposition. May I get you another cocktail?"

Mary said that he might, and he moved towards the table where Cyril functioned, but before he could return luncheon was announced and the party trooped downstairs.

Mary found herself seated between two highly ornamental young men. The one on her right was boyish about the caviare and declared it to be his favourite food; he called everyone 'my dear,' and what he liked he 'adored.' Mary remembered him as the precocious young person who wrote reminiscences whose exotic petals dropped a little wearily, with the correct degree of ennui, into the desert air of a fashionable decadence. His speciality both in his pose and his prose was a sophisticated *naïveté*. He was popularly supposed to have all the fashionable vices, which tradition he carried off with an air of wide-eyed innocence that was considered as amusing as it was charming. "When one thinks

of all the things one doesn't know and never will," he said to Mary, this young man who had the reputation for knowing everything and having done everything.

The other young man also wrote. Although he had gone twenty-five he had not yet written his reminiscences, it is true, but specialised instead on novels which were so obscure that everyone said that they were terribly clever, and the choice of adjectives was probably a case of the unconscious expression of the truth. He would no doubt write his reminiscences in due course—in the meantime he was fully occupied, being a man of genius and the protégé of a peer of the Press.

Opposite Mary sat a young man with a dark Jewish face almost savage in its sensuality. His eyes were dark jungles in which prowled the animal that was his nature. He came and stood by her when they were all upstairs again in the drawing-room with coffee and liqueurs. He was drinking absinth.

"He would," Mary thought.

He held the little glass up to the light and smiled at her through half-closed eyes, and murmured in semi-intoxicated ecstasy, "To be drenched in absinth!"

Mary thought, "Oh, Lord!" She said, "Need you be so decadent?"

He crooned in that same tone of swooning voluptuousness, "Why *not* be decadent?"

Mary shrugged and walked away. In the crowd Gilbert plucked at her arm.

"I've got to go in a minute. Let me introduce you to the son of the heir to the title—Isabel's cousin Rex, and his American wife. You'll find her marvellous copy—a super-vamp."

"No," Mary protested, "I've had enough copy. I want to go home."

"Well, you can't; you're at a party; you came here officially to enjoy yourself, so you've dam' well got to enjoy yourself. Come on."

There was no help for it. He guided Mary through the crowd and confronted her with a fair-haired young man with Isabel's coldly regular features, but instead of her eyes of green ice his were blue flames. He had a curious flicker of the eyelashes, as

though there were things in life he did not wish to face. It was a good-looking face she thought, boyish and candid, but a little weak. He surprised Mary by declaring that he had read all her books and admired them.

Mary felt embarrassed, as writers always are, by such statements.

She laughed, awkwardly. "You don't have to say that, you know."

"But it's true," he insisted, and added to her embarrassment by telling her about them, in order to prove that he was not bluffing. He was the only person who had taken any interest in her as a writer, and she was grateful to him in spite of her embarrassment. She steered him away from her own books to those of her contemporaries, and was beginning to enjoy her conversation with him when a young woman with very dark eyes and a very white face and a vermilion gash of a mouth rushed up to them.

"Oh, Honey," she said, "we gotta go."

'Honey' introduced her as his wife, and inquired a little impatiently where it was they'd gotta go.

She looked at him a little reproachfully. She had marvellous eyes, Mary thought, though a little too heavily made up.

"Why, Honey, you never have forgotten that we promised to go to Lady Ashworth's cocktail party at four?"

"I didn't promise to go." He looked annoyed. "I hate cocktail parties, particularly those that begin at four. It's ridiculous. I'll come on later. I was talking to Miss Thane about her marvellous books. You read her last one on the boat coming over, you remember?"

"Did I? Oh, yes, I believe I did. *Passion's Pall*, wasn't it?" Mary winced. She resisted the temptation to say, "No, Nux Vomica," and Poppy Merrill flowed on. "I know I thought it just too terribly clever, but I can never remember titles, nor the author's names."

"Nor the publisher, nor the plot, nor anything that in them is." Her husband's voice was scornful. "It wasn't *Passion's* anything. Miss Thane isn't that sort of writer."

"Isn't she, dear?" She smiled at Mary. "Personally, I like a little passion. Why, do you know, Miss Thane, I'm so

passionate that I just adore hot weather. Isn't that true, Honey?"

Honey replied curtly that personally ne considered that she had had too many of Cyril's Eunuch's Dreams.

She giggled. "That reminds me, Honey. I asked Cyril why it was called Eunuch's Dream, and do you know what he said?"

Rex looked uncomfortable. "That's as old as the hills, Poppy. Come on. We'd better go if we're going. Good-bye, Miss Thane. I hope we'll meet again."

Poppy Merrill held out her hand to Mary. "Good-bye, dear. I just adore meeting you clever women. And I'm sure I loved your book, even if it wasn't called *Tainted Virtue*."

She departed in an invisible cloud of chypre. Mary heard her voice outside the door. "Darling, it's been so nice. What wunnerful roses! Do you know, I just adore roses—they're so passionate. . . ."

The party was breaking up, Mary noticed with relief. The young man of the reminiscences was playing the piano in the little room which opened out of the drawing-room, his admirers grouped about the piano. It was broad daylight and a clear spring sunlight poured into the room, but all the electric lights were on. Mary was standing aimlessly by the piano wondering how she could get away, when Gilbert re-emerged.

He said, under cover of a jazzed version of the Melody in F, "I'm going now—I'll give you a lift if you like. You needn't say good-bye to anyone—no one expects it. Isabel's gone off to the hairdresser's—she always leaves her parties to finish up without her—works on the belief that the most long-winded guest must depart some time."

Mary took a deep breath when they came out into the fresh air. Gilbert laughed. "I agree," he said in reply to her unspoken thought. "Let's go for a drive round the Park—not Regent's Park, it smells of caged animals. Let's walk a bit until we find a cab with the hood down."

They found one within a hundred yards. They drove out of the sedate yellow avenues of Regent's Park, past terraces and squares to Hyde Park, circled round to Kensington Gardens and

down to Sloane Square. They talked trivialities, but as they neared Sloane Square Gilbert took Mary's hand.

"You're still happy, Gilbert?" she asked him, for he had fallen silent.

"I don't know, Mary. I've got an odd feeling that all the happy times are over."

She was dismayed by the brooding note in his voice.

"But, Gilbert, just now when you're getting what you wanted so much?"

"I know. It's because of that. A sort of superstitious foreboding. The feeling that life isn't generous enough to give one something one never really hoped to get, without demanding some frightful price later on—that sooner or later it will even the average up as it were. Sheer superstition, of course." He laughed self-consciously and gave her hand a little reassuring squeeze.

But Mary was not reassured. It was quite obvious that now that his excited elation had died down, Gilbert was filled with misgivings. It might well be, she thought, that his soul found it could not breathe in the rarified atmosphere in which it yearned to live, to which it had broken through; perhaps a man could not realise so tremendous a dream, so consuming a desire, and save his soul alive.

"Come in and have some tea and talk with me," she suggested. "We may not have a chance to see much of each other from now onwards."

"I know. But you'll always be in my life, Mary. 'For I in your heart have dwelling, and you in my heart forever,' sort of thing." He smiled. "I can't come in now, my dear—I've got to get along to the office. But I'm going to buy you a whole cartload of Spring from that stall there."

He kept the taxi waiting whilst he bought her an armful of daffodils and mimosa from a flower-seller in the square.

In the gay spring sunlight he drew her to him suddenly and kissed her.

"Good-bye, my dear; don't worry about me—I'm just a bit keyed up, that's all. I'll come and see you as soon as I can."

He climbed back into the taxi and she turned into the dark

entrance to the flats, spring gold crushed against her breast, his swift kiss still living upon her lips.

“For I in your heart have dwelling, and you in my heart forever.”

It was truer than he realised, she thought, sorrowfully, as the lift shot upwards to her empty, waiting rooms.

XXIV

ENGAGEMENT

I

AT last it was all definitely arranged. Isabel had found a house in St. James' Square, a tall, narrow, red brick house with deep windows, flower-boxes, and striped sun-blinds, sandwiched between a tall white house and an ornate Regency mansion.

She found the house in June, and a date in August was fixed for the wedding, which was to take place at St. George's, Hanover Square, with a reception at the Carlton and a honeymoon on the Lido. Gilbert found his portrait as a small inset on page pictures of the bride-to-be in illustrated weeklies. 'Lady Isabel Merrill, only daughter of the Earl of Tringham, whose engagement to Mr. Gilbert Stroud of Montreal is announced.' And then a few remarks about Mr. Gilbert Stroud being of an old Canadian family well known in Montreal. Some of the papers described him as a shipping magnate, which surprised and amused him as much as 'portrait of the bridegroom-to-be inset.' John Stroud was even more amused than his son. It was something to be inset on the picture of the only daughter of the tenth earl of Tringham, wasn't it? Nothing like that had ever happened to a Stroud before.

And the pictures in the illustrated dailies. 'Lady Isabel Merrill, whose engagement to the young Canadian shipping magnate was announced recently, snapped walking in the park with her fiancé.' Or walking down Bond Street, or leaving her town house. And pictures in the illustrated home magazines. 'Lady Isabel Merrill'—generally it was 'the beautiful Lady Isabel Merrill'—whose engagement, etc., photographed at Tringham Castle, her stately—or beautiful, or romantic, or fine old—family seat, or ancestral home, and then pictures of the betrothed couple posed on the steps with a dog, or gazing thoughtfully at the water-lily pond that photographed so artistically and smelt so abominably, or holding tennis-rackets or golf-clubs or riding-crops outside the disused stables or under the crumbling Gothic arch; or seated in deck-chairs on the terrace with a vaguely Stewart background, and occasionally with Lord Merrill and Mr. John Stroud grouped tastefully behind the chairs.

The presumed popularity of the peerage with the public was a

source of continual surprise to Gilbert. He wondered whether the public was really interested or whether editors only liked to think it was. He thought how much it would amuse Stemway. And when he thought of Stemway his own amusement died, and something ached in him. . . .

Where was Stem now? Back in Rome, he supposed. How hot it would be there now, with the sun beating up from the narrow streets and reflecting from the yellow stone of the buildings, and that smothering air of siesta that always invades the Roman afternoons, and the heat shimmering in a haze like suspended quivering water over the wide plain of the Campagna. . . . Ah, but there would be a little cooling wind above the falls at Tivoli; Tivoli of the laughing water, pagan temples, and choirs of nightingales; Tivoli whose very name was music. . . . Tivoli where they were to have had a villa on the edge of the olive groves, and see between the sentinel cypresses the dome of St. Peter's far away like the sail of a distant ship upon the horizon of an empty sea. . . .

Under the impetus of a tidal wave of memory, something beat in his brain and cried out like a prayer. "I couldn't write to you again, Stem, after that last failure to keep faith. It was the end for both of us. It had to be. I wasn't built for great friendships, Stem, because I wasn't built unselfishly enough. You mattered, Stem, more than anyone ever will; you'll always matter, all my life, because you're there, rooted in my imagination, but something else was in my imagination, too, so that it went hunting, and where it hunted I had to ride. . . . And if you wrote now, out of all the silence, I couldn't tell you this, because of something blind and deaf and dumb in you that could not answer. . . . So close we were, Stem, you and I, yet always that something between us, the veil that was left when all the others were lifted, the veil that was left for you to lift—and you could not. . . ."

Sometimes when he thought of Stemway he hated Isabel. A dark tide of resentment would sweep him. Because of her he had failed Stem. What, he would ask himself, in the grip of those violent revulsions of feeling, had her life to do with his? What had they in common or shared together? Nothing. Nor ever would have. The life they would share together was not of the

stuff of inevitability; it was like a record that you placed on a gramophone of your own free will, and it made its little tune, that you could stop when you were tired of. But it was not so with him and Stem. Their lives had been running parallel for years, unknown to either of them; they had tracked each other in the dark of destiny; their lives and days and destinies were knit together in one fabric; this was not any little tune that you could turn on or off to please yourself; it was the very melody of life itself; the very fugue of fate.

But there was this thing in himself which reached out to women, warring with that other thing in him which despised them and resented their hold on him. Always there was this conflict in himself, tearing at him, so that sometimes he could tear the heart out of this woman he so ardently desired and yet so bitterly resented, so that she might share the torment of the conflict dragging at his hidden life.

Yet by the possession of the one perfect woman who had come into his life he was revenged for all the others; they could do nothing to him any more, who had made the most exquisite of them all his own, to do with as he willed. Nor was he in her power, this cold, proud, beautiful daughter of a lord; she could come between him and Stem; she could play havoc with his imagination and his nerves, keep him riding, riding, for the hunt was in full cry; but soon now would come the kill, and the mocking, tantalising, elusive quarry would become the victim, and therein lay his compensation, his reward, and very essence of his revenge.

And that thought would evoke faint rustlings of the dead leaves of forgotten things in the subterranean passages of his hidden consciousness, and the scar upon his wrist would throb; he would become the child again, quivering with pain and rage and resentment, the hatred in a woman's eyes striking him body and soul as lightning strikes a tree that shudders and is helplessly consumed. Never consciously did he remember that incident of his childhood or connect it with this conflict that entered into all his associations with women; but it was there, deep down, out of sight, a healed wound, but a spiritual scar remained, as ineradicable as the physical one; only when the scar on his wrist ached he knew that it was caused by the throbbing of a nerve, whereas when the scar upon

his spirit made itself felt, he did not know the cause of that sickness of mind and spirit expressed in terms of conflict and unrest and disturbance. . . .

When he thought of his forthcoming marriage he would tell himself that he was doing what he wanted to do; but always something deeper rooted in him than this conviction would suggest that he did not know what he wanted to do, and never would, because whereas other people were bodies that moved about under the influence of definable things called souls, he was merely a mass of conflict that moved about in a body; other people lived by the light of their soul-lamps, but he floundered in darkness and chaos because long and long ago the lamp had been smashed and there was all this jumble and wreckage within him, and the thing he wanted more than anything in life he did not want as he felt one should want the thing one wanted most. But one had to have some objective and strive for it, to give some meaning to life, to supply oneself with a more adequate motive for living than merely eating and moving about and sleeping and gratifying the animal impulses generally. At all costs one had to get some meaning into this business of living, or one drowned in seas of futility. . . .

If only one could see with a simple, single vision, with no conflict to blur the clear-cut outlines of one's objective and sap the vehemence of one's desire!

And then to his rescue would come the Stroud will-to-power, the Stroud insistence on its own integrity, the Stroud self-assertiveness that thrust introspective thought into the background, and the old assurance would come to him, as on that night leaving Cherbourg, and crossing the Piazza Signoria, his objective crystallising in a dream of beauty among the Florentine stars, and his mind would close the doors upon those compartments where conflict stirred uneasily in the dark.

He continued to visit Mary Thane at her rooms in Sloane Square during his engagement, but now he no longer desired her physically, for all of his conscious desires, mental and physical, were consumed in the one flame of his desire to possess, body and soul, this one woman who fulfilled all that he demanded of a woman. Only sometimes when the conflict waged, and the Roman fever was upon him again, he would go to Mary and press her cool hands

to his face, as though that way the world could be shut out; and sometimes with his head heavy on her breast, and the light caress of her hands upon his temples, the conflict would subside and peace break over him in gentle waves. She gave him peace as no one in the world could, and that he exhausted her mentally and emotionally, and gave her nothing, nothing, did not occur to him.

And still his sickness of spirit must seize him sometimes, so that he must hurt her, because in spite of all that she did for him she was of that enemy regiment of women; and sometimes, being only human, her selflessness failed her, and she would resent that she must give so much and receive nothing in return, and she would strive to possess something of his troubled spirit, to make some part of him essentially her own. But at the first hint of possessiveness on her part she was for him ranged among the enemy; his scar would throb madly and he would hate in her the very things which in other moods drew him to her—her tranquillity, her intelligence, her sense of humour, her stark mental and emotional honesty, her essential sanity, and all that it comprised of unsentimentality, lack of jealousy, and masculinity of attitude in the matter of sex ethics.

For her part, she accepted the surface change in their relationship without thinking much about it. Technically, she supposed, she had been his mistress, and now technically she ceased to be. Actually their relationship was unchanged; he had always needed a friend more than he had needed a mistress, and always it had been by something in her personality to which he responded, something in her mental make-up which he seized upon because he lacked it within himself, that she had held him. She was now what she had always been for him over and above everything else, whether he was always conscious of that fact or not—a refuge; so that it was all one for her, whether he found sanctuary by drowning in physical passion or drawing upon her reserves of sympathy and understanding. She knew that she represented for him the one thing static in the shifting chaos of his hidden life, and that therefore whatever happened he must always turn back to her, however long the interval between. And she pitied him, and resented him, and loved him, and had no illusions. . . .

2

For Gilbert there was a quality of unreality about those days of his engagement. He saw Isabel every day; dined, danced, lunched, walked, drove, rode with her; discussed with her the furnishing and decorative detail of the house in which they were to live, yet always it seemed to him that the woman who was to be Gilbert Stroud's wife was not there; this cold, pale woman who was always at his side, who gave him her cold cheek to kiss, this woman of whom he knew nothing save that she was beautiful, this was not she whose face had been drawn among the Florentine stars, because for him she was not real; she was the cold, empty husk of beauty, with no warmth or reality in her; this was her outward semblance, but she herself was missing.

Sometimes he tried to break through the shell and find her. Always since he had known her, it seemed to him, he had been trying to do that. He would take the cold, beautiful hands in his that were so warm and nervous and alive, and he would say, "Isabel, doesn't it mean anything to you that you're going to marry me? You're so detached—indifferent—aloof—I don't understand. I don't expect you to love me, but you can't be indifferent; I must mean something to you. . . ."

And she would withdraw her hands with an expression of mingled boredom and distaste; would say something such as, "Don't create a situation, Gilbert;" or, "Don't make a scene;" or, with a cynical smile, "Need we be so introspective?"

Always in this fashion she would elude him, for all his gropings, till sometimes he would think that it was true of him as Stem had once said—Stem who did it himself—that he tended to see more in people than there was or ever could be. Then something in his heart would harden; he was buying this woman, and what you bought you finally had to pay for; very well, he was prepared to pay up all right, but she would be entirely his, all of her cool, lovely body, and what there was of her frozen soul; she would cost him, he knew, thousands of English pounds, hundreds of thousands of Canadian dollars; that was the debit side of the account, and God only knew what else should be added in the form of conflict and mental suffering; but that was all the more reason for insisting on

full value on the credit side; and what was not given as part of the fair deal he would have no compunction in wresting for himself.

When he thought of his marriage in those terms, as he frequently did, there would be that sense of a knot tightening in his heart, and in his temples, and the sharp shooting pain of that nerve under the scar on his wrist, and then his mouth would tighten to a straight line, and his eyes under frowning brows would be glinting spear points ready to stab through any barriers that opposed his will; including the icy barricade that enclosed Isabel Merrill. Ice that cannot be melted, he would tell himself, can at least be broken.

Thus Gilbert Stroud on the eve of his marriage, and farther away from love than he had ever been.

PART III
POSSESSIVE

PLUCKING OF THE ORCHID

I

THE dog-days were upon London. The houses of the great were shuttered, staring with blind eyes upon the summer sultriness of streets and gardens and squares, listless, inanimate, laved in siesta. A smell of tar and petrol, dust and heat, beat up from the streets. The suburbs were invaded by the hot pungent scent of the privet flowers, oppressively suggestive of somnolent and interminable afternoons inhabited by brass knockers, vermilion and ultramarine doors, a corporation water-cart lost in a wilderness of groves and avenues of Sabbatical emptiness and ennui.

It was understood that 'everyone' was away, in spite of the surging millions who remained. London was 'empty,' and inasmuch as it was drained of its vitality, the legend might be said to have its roots in fact. It was the unfashionable time of the year for a fashionable wedding, when 'everyone' was 'out of Town,' but it was the ideal time for the Lido, and since one had to marry sooner or later, Isabel reflected, one might as well marry when a honeymoon could be made an escape from the enervating lethargy of London to the more amusing lassitude of the Lido. Rex and Poppy were going there after the wedding, and there were a number of amusing people one knew there already. In the fusty atmosphere of the house in Regent's Park, Isabel Merrill brooded upon that sunny strip of sand stretched across the Venetian lagoons like amber in a torquoise setting. Of the man she was to marry she thought no more than as a means to an end. She, too, knew that what one bought one had to pay for, and she was prepared to pay up when the account was rendered; but she, too, was determined to have value for the price.

In the dog-days, therefore, she wore a long white satin gown and the white veil of the bride, and carried a sheaf of lilies, all of which photographed very well for the illustrated Press. The people who crowded the steps of St. George's to see the bride, remarked how white she was; white as her lilies, they said, romantically, but she was no paler than usual, and perfectly composed. Poppy, in pink georgette with an enormous picture-hat, was more exotic than the bridesmaids. Rex made a good-

looking, faintly amused young usher with the shining golden Merrill head and the orthodox white flower in the button-hole of his immaculate morning coat. Everyone thought it was a pity he couldn't have been best man instead of that self-conscious Mr. Tucker, who really wasn't a gentleman and looked so terribly sheepish. Only, of course, the Strouds hadn't any friends over here and had to take what they could get, though you might have thought some of them would have come over from Montreal specially. Lord Merrill wore a sardonic smile and a gardenia; his morning coat was frayed about the collar and suggested a tinge of green. The Honourable Hugo Merrill paced the church with his brother, and insisted on telling racy anecdotes and stories in a whisper that was as audible as his normal speech, punctuated by his brother's chuckles. His wife was florid with feathers and dripping with diamonds; she gave the impression that if it had been possible to wear the family plate for the occasion she would have done so. John Stroud occasionally regarded his silk hat with surprise, and was inclined to treat the whole matter as a ridiculous joke. Well, anyhow, it was a joke, when you came to think of it, himself, John Stroud, dolled up in a morning coat, silk hat, and gardenia, hobnobbing with lords and baronets and knights, pre-war and post-war. . . . John Stroud, who had gotten a little shop-keeper's daughter into trouble alfresco on a Canadian hillside, and the product of that starry night's communion with nature marrying the daughter of one of the oldest peerages in England. There was progress for you, if you liked! And John Stroud brushed his silk hat once again with the sleeve of his brand new coat and chuckled softly.

The whole thing amused him enormously, from the huddle of Press reporters at the door, feverishly taking down the names of the guests as they arrived at the church, to the disapproving glances of svelte-sabled and pearl-hung ladies who were not at all sure that the bridegroom's father was the sort of person one could know even in these days, and wondered if dear Isabel were not making a mistake, in spite of the wealth she was marrying. . . . Ships, wasn't it, the Stroud business? Well, of course, shipping was all right; anything was all right really if you did it on a large enough scale; then you could even get away with

canned cantaloupe like Poppy Ferrars, and reserve a place in the peerage for yourself. The Strouds were rich enough for their connections with trade not to obtrude itself; it was overlaid with dollars, and money would overlay anything, even a rough colonial heartiness and pronounced Canadian twang.

Gilbert Stroud was good-looking, too, and with a sort of arrogance that counter-balanced the shipping and trading part of things, but he wasn't just right, somehow, was he? Too ineradicably suggestive of the prairie and the great open spaces where men are men, and all that sort of thing—curiously un-English, too broad-shouldered and violent in his young masculinity to be fashionable in an age of svelte, slender, chic young men whom merely to look at one knew danced with a positively professional perfection. You could not imagine this Gilbert Stroud dancing like that; you could not imagine him playing tennis or being helpful at a cocktail party or afternoon tea; he suggested rather the type of young man who loves to risk his neck at Brooklands and who skis everybody off the slopes at St. Moritz; you couldn't imagine him playing polo at Hurlingham, but you could imagine him riding impossible horses, bareback, across those great open spaces. There was no need to be such a husky he-man as all that in this age of Bright Young People, was there? It 'wasn't done' off the 'movies.' He was not, in short, the modern young man, polished and chic and amusing, such as one might have imagined Isabel marrying.

"Altogether too virile for a young woman with emotions as sterilised as Isabel's," was how Hugo Merrill summed it up to his wife. That lady looked at him coldly and begged him not to be coarse.

Poppy thought that Gilbert had never looked more attractive. She gazed at him excitedly. "He looks terribly passionate," she thought yearningly, and tried to catch his eye.

But Gilbert had no eyes for anyone in all that fashionable crowd but the white cold woman who was his bride, and when he looked at her a great sense of triumph swept him.

She was perfect. That she was so cold and proud and aloof was all to the good that day. He did not want a blushing, simpering bride such as anyone might have. You might not be able to love a woman as cold as Isabel Merrill, but, by God, you could

be proud of her. And wasn't that what he had wanted? Hadn't he wanted just that tide of admiration flowing out to her from the eyes of the crowd, wanted it in the knowledge that however intensely they might admire, this perfect thing was his; their admiration was tribute to his power—the power that had acquired so much perfection of beauty. There was something almost savage in his sense of proprietorship as he looked at her, a mist of white at the grey door of the church, drifting forward into the dim blue twilight. Something exulted in him. The church quivered with music; people whispered; nudged; stared; the organ music swelled, a gathering golden crescendo . . . what heights would it not touch, what glory? It shook the air for a space, then fell away in a tremulous diminuendo, until it was nothing but a shaken whisper upon the vibrating air. She was borne towards him on that warm, golden, exultant tide. The scent of the lilies and tuber-roses with which the church was decorated was almost overpowering. . . . He was standing at the top of the aisle, and she was coming towards him, her hand resting very lightly on the arm of her father, as though surprised at the unwonted intimacy. The tenth earl of Tringham walked with his head down and a smile a little like a sneer lifting the corners of his mouth; he loped rather than walked, and something in his manner was suggestive of a lewd internal chuckling. But the Lady Isabel's face was an ivory mask, and she walked with her head held high. People craned forward from the pews to see her as she passed; they forgot decorum and stood up on the seats.

As in a dream Gilbert stepped forward to receive his bride. So often these last few feverish days had he gone over in his mind the correct procedure that was required of him, but it seemed to him that the ceremony conducted itself; he was caught up into its smoothly turning machinery and it did with him what was wanted of him, so that somehow he was kneeling upon a red hassock before an altar that flamed with lilies, pink and white, that drenched the air with a sweetness as poignant as music. The fine lawn sleeve of the clerical robe touched his face as he knelt there before that stranger who read hurried, meaningless words over him and Isabel. And not a tremor in Isabel's voice as she made the responses, and in his own a curt matter-of-factness.

And flickering curiously through his mind like a fitful flame, a thought of Nicholas Stemway. Stem and himself in the Café Greco, Stem with his head thrown back and his eyes half closed, talking of the Renaissance, and the new renaissance that would come with the revival of faith; Stem's voice vibrating with passion—so few could be passionate about ideas. Stem and himself leaning on the parapet of the Palatine looking out across the Campagna; with the wind from snow-touched Sabines soft as flowers on their faces. . . . Stem tossing back his dark lock of hair from his brow, his mouth half amused, half contemptuous, "Charming, I think." He had said it about Raymore; he would say it now if he could walk in and see, "Full choral service. . . . Charming, I think. . . ."

They had risen; the choir had broken out somewhere unseen; there was organ music vibrating again upon the lily-drenched twilight. Isabel's arm was laid lightly upon his; they were going into the vestry to sign the register. A thin clear sound of bells was imposed for a few silver seconds upon the surging music as the clock struck the hour.

In the vestry an atmosphere of constraint; Rex searching about for something amusing to say to relieve the strain; at all costs Bright Young People must not allow it to be thought of them that the sentimental side of a wedding, as expressed through the medium of a full choral service, virginal veil, bridal lilies, was anything but a rag. Rex's flippant, "Sign on the dotted line, please," as Tucker's great freckled hirsute hand applied his signature to the register. Isabel's fine distinguished writing, his own, heavy, egotistic. Rex's "Pass right along the car, please" as they crowded out of the vestry, Lord Merrill persistently sardonic, as though he had just completed a good deal; Hugo pompous; John Stroud amused. . . . Poppy's wink as the organ broke into the Wedding March; Gilbert self-conscious; Isabel alone, detached, almost disinterested, as though the whole thing had nothing much to do with her; the procession down the aisle, her hand, with the narrow diamond and platinum wedding-ring, resting almost imperceptibly on his arm.

Then the blinding glare of the sunshine after the twilight of the church; the waiting cars with the floating white ribbons and

white heather; the crowd pressing forward; the click of Press cameras. In the car he raised his wife's hand to his lips, but she appeared not to notice.

2

At the reception Gilbert found himself looking at Poppy. He had a sudden curious sense of kinship with her. There were these Merrills, Isabel, Rex, Anne, with their regular features, their white skins, their shining hair, their thin proud mouths, with their breeding and their pride and their sterilised emotions; and here were himself and Poppy, two outsiders, stepping in and buying themselves a Merrill apiece with their dollars, because they happened to fancy one and had the purchase price. . . . They weren't so proud, then, these Merrills, that they couldn't be bought. . . . and yet they despised people who made money. . . . What right had they to their pride?

He could admire this girl Poppy, for all her vulgarity and impudence and sensuality; she so obviously didn't give a damn for all this blue blood and family tradition; she had bought the son of the heir of the tenth earl of Tringham, and one of these days she would be a countess and Isabel would take a back seat. Poppy would score everyway; she was younger than Isabel, and her money was her own, she had not had to marry to get it. And there she was with her terrific vitality and sensuality married to Rex Merrill, who undoubtedly regarded her as an outsider. But Poppy would hold her own, Gilbert thought; with her vitality and her money she would know how to hold a husband; she would keep him poor and keep him tired, and he might despise her as much as he liked. After all, she was keeping him. . . .

Poppy, catching his eyes upon her, made a grimace and winked. Later, when she had finished giving a lady reporter some helpful particulars about the bride's trousseau and the wedding presents, she came over to him, slopping her champagne as she came.

"We're alike, you and I, I guess."

"I was thinking that."

"I know. I'm not slow on the uptake."

"I know you're not." He smiled.

"Nor you either; you've got feeling—but you can take it from me it won't be any good to you with a Merrill."

He frowned. "You can't expect me to discuss that now."

"Not now, no, but later you'll be so darned glad to discuss it with someone you'd ring a maiden aunt up at four in the morning if you thought she'd listen. I know, you see, Honey, I've had some."

Gilbert turned as a hand was laid on his arm. It was Mary Thane.

"Why, Mary——"

"You'd forgotten you invited me? But you did, you know."

"You can't expect a man to remember his lady friends on his wedding-day," Poppy remarked, smiling at Mary, "but later on he can't expect 'em to remember him. Isn't that so, Miss Thane?"

Without waiting for an answer she sauntered away in the direction of the buffet.

Gilbert smiled down at Mary. "It was nice of you to come, my dear."

She heard the gratitude in his voice.

"I didn't go to the church—I hate weddings. I just wanted to come along to wish you the usual luck, but with rather more than the usual sincerity—and to tell you that I'm always there in your life when you want me."

"Bless you, Mary."

He felt the quick warm pressure of her fingers close over his a moment; heard her low voice, husky with emotion.

"You're doing what you wanted to do, Gilbert—it's up to you to make a job of it."

"I know. I'll come and see you when I get back."

Their hands fell apart. It was she who brought him back to the realities of the present.

"You're wanted to assist with the cutting of the cake."

Of course, the cake! The white, silly, pretentious thing! The confection of affection. There was a flashlight photograph taken as Isabel plunged in the long silver knife with the absurd spray of white heather tied to the handle. How inane it all was, Gilbert thought, eating cake and drinking champagne in the middle of the morning.

It was a relief when at last one could change and get away. But even safely deposited at Victoria Station, there was the going-

away ritual to be endured. There were Poppy and Rex and Anne and a crowd of other bright young people leaving a litter of rose-petals and confetti on the platform; elderly silk-hatted clubmen being jocular; matrons in sable and satin and white kid gloves waving perfumed handkerchiefs; porters grinning; Press cameras clicking the 'happy couple,' the bride 'charming in her Nile green travelling suit, the bridegroom tastefully attired in a brown lounge suit,' as one paper afterwards gushed. . . . People being facetious, people being sentimental; a crowd gathering. . . . Isabel with her little frozen smile, her self-possession never leaving her; Tucker shuffling shyly on the edge of the crowd, keeping close to John Stroud, as though he were a sort of buoy in this surging sea of English society. . . .

And then at last that final chorus of 'Good-byes' and 'Good luck,' that final idiotic shower of confetti and rose-petals and white heather, and they were alone, in opposite corners of their first-class reserved compartment.

Gilbert looked at his wife.

"Well, thank God that's over! You must be terribly tired, Isabel."

"I am a little. It was a rush to get away. But we should have a good crossing, and that will be a rest, and we go straight on to the Golden Arrow. It will be nice to be in Paris again."

He came over and sat beside her, took her hand.

"I want you to be happy, Isabel. I'll do all I can." She neither moved nor answered.

"Isabel!" There was something like anguish in his voice "You can't go on being so indifferent. We're married! Don't you realise? We—belong."

"Do we?" She went on looking disinterestedly out of the window.

He went back and sat in the opposite corner again. He watched the pale beautiful averted face, and there was again that sense of something hardening in his heart. She was ice, and not to be melted by tenderness. There came again to him that thought that ice that will not melt can nevertheless be broken.

POSSESSION

I

THE beauty of Paris smote Gilbert afresh. Why had he never been in Paris with Stem? This was a place for idling and talking. What lotus-eating hours they might have spent in the cafés of Montparnasse, loitering over the bookstalls on the Quai d'Orsay, prowling through the flower-market, walking in the gardens of the Luxembourg. How they would have laughed together at Notre Dame over the saints who held their beheaded heads in their hands. He could hear Stem's voice, "Charming, I think."

They would have stayed in the narrow Grande Chaumière, or the Rue Regnard, and gone out to St. Cloud on the steamer, picnicked in the Forest, made Sunday excursions to Versailles. So many lovely things they might have done together. Odd that when first he had come to Paris after the war he should have been alone, and now that he was in Paris again it was with this strange cold woman who was his wife, and they did none of these careless, happy, friendly things. Instead, they stayed in a palatial hotel in the Etoile district and breathed a Ritz-Carlton atmosphere which is the same in any capital in Europe. They dined only at those places that fashion considered chic. It was only during the mornings, when Isabel went shopping, or to be waved, or manicured, or massaged that Gilbert was able to savour the true essence of Paris.

And then he would walk the streets and sit at the cafés and think of Stem and those Roman days; of Mary and those London days, and those days and nights at her bungalow on the edge of the common, where the scents of gorse and pines and sea were mingled. He would hear the voices of these two, remember tricks of their speech and gestures. The quality of those days with Stem. Stem sprawling in an easy-chair at the flat that looked out across the city, his long stained fingers pressing down the tobacco in the bowl of his pipe, his drawling voice tintured sometimes by a flame, like the sombre dark of his eyes. Stem at the piano with *L'Après-midi d'un Faun* creeping out like a plaintive dream from under his fingers. Stem's tense body straining towards the sunset across the glowing city; those white Roman nights when the stars seemed

to lean down out of the sky, and fountains dripped in deserted piazzas; the Baroque room in the German *pensione* in the Via Venete Settembre, with its red distempered walls and its peeling roccoco plaster, and the purple night outside. . . . Their crazy drives out along the Appian Way in a swaying *carrozzia* with what Stern called 'an unhygienic horse.' And the lights of Frascati across the Campagna like a great jewelled brooch laid upon the dark bosom of the hills, and the moonlight washing the great plain in a white flood. . . . Something vital had passed then, in the quality of those days and nights, something indestructible created.

And it had been so with Mary on those wind-swept, sea-salt days when they had gone riding over the flat east country, with the sea a white line of light in the distance, and the fir trees embroidered in dark ciphers of beauty on the pale silk of the sky, like a Chinese tapestry; and on those nights in the little whitewashed rooms that smelled of the sea, and lavender, and the stocks that poured out their heavy scent like incense to be breathed in gratefully by the little house, its windows flung wide to the night, like arms held out to gather the lover-like sweetness and tenderness of the night; and those mornings when he had wakened by her side, and known the caress of her hands, and seen her eyes both laughing and tender, heard the friendly warmth of her voice. Warm, living intimacies, the very stuff of life! And he had flung them all away for a cold lovely statue of a woman at whom people, both men and women, turned their heads to look, in restaurants, theatres, and even when they drove in the streets. Men looked from her to him, now, as he had dreamed they would, curious to see the owner of so much beauty, envying him the possession of this so lovely lady. . . .

Possession! Sitting alone at the cafés of Montparnasse whilst she spent his money on the other side of the river, he would ask himself if it were not the greatest illusion of all, the illusion of possession. For how much of her did he possess? She did not close her door against him, but she did not hold it open. He might stand, as he had stood, beside her bed and look down upon the white revealed loveliness of her; he might lay, as he had laid, a flaming rose between her breasts—but it could not melt the coldness of her eyes. Had she locked her door against him she could not have

defeated him as completely as by this persistent indifference, varied only by her boredom or distaste. Had she suffered, lain like a lamb helpless before the slaughterer, or made a martyred sacrifice of herself for his sake, he might at least have extracted a sadistic pleasure from her acquiescence; but she did not feel sufficiently strongly about him even to suffer because of him; whatever resentments were hers she hid effectively under this mask of a consuming, devastating, utterly defeating indifference. She did not afford him even the subversive, hostile satisfaction of feeling a brute; she made him feel a worm, despicable, beneath contempt. She left him baffled and bewildered, and profoundly humiliated. And no woman before had ever humiliated him. He realised even in those first few days of his married life that nothing he could do could hurt her because he was simply not sufficiently spiritually important to her. He was negligible.

But there were times when he could forget the humiliation she heaped upon him, when his pride in her consumed everything else, moments when the essence of his dream came true; such moments as when she was seated beside him at the theatre, or walked ahead of him through a restaurant; when even the fashionably dressed crowd at Longchamps turned their heads to look at her in wondering admiration. He knew then that men envied him the acquisition of such a woman; their envy fed his sense of power like fuel heaped on flame; he knew that however rich or powerful they might be this perfect beauty in woman form was not theirs, but his, and that however much money they might lavish on their women they could never equal her, the Lady Isabel, who was now the Lady Isabel Stroud.

And there was this, that however much she might despise him, however much humiliate and defeat him by her indifference, the fact remained that she was his wife, body and soul she belonged to him; to him she owed the food that kept her alive, the clothes that both covered and revealed her lovely body, the bed wherein she slept; all her pleasures, necessities, comforts; if she were ill his money would make her well again, if she were dying his money would keep her alive if anything could keep her alive, and when she died, whether before or after him, it would be his money that would pay for her grave.

2

They were a week in Paris and a week-end in Venice before crossing over to the Lido, and there was a miracle of a night such as can only happen in the Adriatic. The lagoon upon which their hotel looked was iridescent as a dragon-fly's wing, blue and green and gold, like a painted thing, under the moon; the Doges Palace and the domes of the Trinita della Salute a soft ivory mirage floating against the dream-like texture of the sky; the stars pressed earthwards out of the blue-grey veils in which they were caught, like sentient things that yearned to shower themselves in a passion of beauty on the quiescent water, and those pavements and buildings milk-white and unsubstantial with the moon. Across the painted mirror of the lagoon, where sky and water fused, there was still a faint suggestion of the cornelian stain of the sunset, although the moon was high and the stars already weary with the languor of the night. Along the Schiavoni the lights quivered red-gold like fantastic fireflies floating in the shadowed water. All of Venice lay like a mirage within a dream in the white incredibility of the night.

Gilbert and Isabel had dined in the hotel restaurant, in the window that stained the water with its light and looked out to the moon-enchanted horizon that held the Lido. They had danced for a little afterwards, but Isabel complained that Gilbert's dancing was not up to her standard; she was tired, she said, and would sit on the verandah of her room for a little while and then go to bed. To-morrow, she insisted, although they had arrived but yesterday, they must go over to the Lido; there was nothing amusing to do in Venice. Gilbert sighed, and said that in that case he also would sit on the verandah and smoke.

"How can it bore you?" he asked, as they sat there looking out over the lagoon. "It's so beautiful. There's something about it that gets you—like a dream you can't forget. It's so beautiful you can't believe it's true."

"Is it? Personally, I think it's all horribly overrated."

He frowned. "You don't think that; you can't, without being blind. It's only because you can't bring yourself to agree with me."

He looked at her as she lay back there in the low chair beside

him, the contemptuous smile he knew so well playing about her mouth. In her white and silver dress she seemed herself part of the moon-white beauty of the night. He wanted to cry out with the pain of that beauty that was his and yet eluded him. It was as though something in him wept with the hurt and despair of it.

He leaned forward, one hand gripping the arm of her chair. The veins on his temples swelled with his intensity.

"Isabel, for God's sake come alive, be real for once! Why do you hate me so? We could be so happy if you would be only a little nice to me. This everlasting indifference of yours makes it all impossible—we can't even talk about the smallest things—we can't even agree about the weather or the view, apparently! We both of us get more human contact from the hall porter and the boots than from each other—we can at least pass the time of day with them without quarrelling! It's impossible for two people to live together with this utter lack of anything approaching mental intimacy!"

She raised her head ever so slightly from its bored contemplation of the lagoon, ever so slightly raised her eyebrows, widened her eyes.

"Are you suggesting after a week of marriage that we should separate?"

It seemed to him that every nerve in his body trembled. His hands clenched in an effort at self-control. He sweated.

"Could we be more separated—farther apart—than we are? Don't you realise that you're never so far away from me as when you're in my arms?"

He plunged his face suddenly in his hands, wracked by a wild desire to weep.

She rose and stood looking down at him, her mouth contemptuous.

"You're very young and hysterical, aren't you?"

She turned and went in through the French window; he heard the click as she turned on the electric light, sat a moment bathed in the rosy pool of light that flooded out to him, then there was the rattle as she drew the curtains on him and on the night. It was the symbolism of that drawing of the curtains, contemptuous, shutting him out, that finished him. He sprang to his feet and rushed into the room. He was beside himself with rage.

"You think you can treat me as you like, don't you, and that I'll stand for it—but you married me, and, my God, you're not going to freeze me out like this!"

She glanced at him standing there, white, blazing-eyed, gripping the curtains, then turned her back on him, sat down before the dressing-table with its Venetian gilt frames and tall shaded candlesticks, and proceeded to remove the spray of orchids from the shoulder of her dress, handling them with a calm, deliberate carefulness. But before she could lay them down they were snatched from her and flung across the room, and her wrists were bruising in a grip relentless as a vice.

She said quietly, "You're hurting me."

He laughed hysterically and his finger-nails broke into her skin. She looked at him coldly, but did not flinch. The finger-nails dug deeper.

"At least I can hurt you physically." He was breathing hard, in the grip of an emotion more violent than any he had ever known. He watched her face; he wanted to see her wince, to cry out; that at least would reduce her to the level of normal humanity; if he could make her cry out with her body's hurt as he cried out with his mind's hurt. . . .

But she met his eyes coldly, and their cold contempt defeated him. He released her wrists and saw that they bled. He watched her, fascinated, as she picked up a handkerchief from her dressing-table and dabbed them, then slid her bracelets from her forearm down over the wounds, concealing them.

It was as though something collapsed in him. He turned away and crossed the room to his own room communicating with it, walking unsteadily, like one drunken or sick. The door swung to behind him and he pitched forward on to his bed and lay there, exhausted by a sense of impotence and defeat.

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GLIMPSE

THE night was still white, and Gilbert Stroud still lying face downwards with his head buried in his arms, when there came a light touch on his shoulder. He started up, and beside his bed stood Isabel, her hair shining where the moon caught it, the pale satin of her dressing-gown a white sheen like moonlight on water. She stood there, looking down at him. He stared, wondering, only half convinced of the reality of this dream-like apparition.

There was curiosity rather than pity in her voice as she asked, "Are you very unhappy?"

He pressed his hands to his face, ashamed of its pitiful twitching. How this woman could humiliate a man!

He answered with difficulty, "You don't suppose I could be anything else?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed, continuing to stare at him with that dispassionate curiosity.

"No." It was she now who spoke with difficulty. "But it is very hard to give—when one has nothing to give. One can only give what is in one—and if there is no warmth in one then one hasn't any to warm others by. Even if one wanted to."

She seemed to brood upon her words, as though expressing a thought new to her.

He said, despairingly, "You needn't despise me so much—be so indifferent. I must mean something to you. It would be almost better if you hated me—there's something getatable and understandable about hate, anyhow."

"I've nothing to hate you for. I can't make you real to me, that's all. It's like—like living in a dream."

"You can't be happy either."

"I don't know. I don't think about it. Sometimes I feel that I'm not really alive."

She looked beyond him, through the window, as though she sought something. He turned over and caught her pale hands, ethereal in the moonlight.

"Oh, Isabel, you're all I've ever wanted in a woman, and I

wanted you so much, and you married me of your own free will, and yet it's like this between us—and this is our honeymoon! It's all so wrong! Doesn't it seem so to you?"

"No. It just doesn't seem real, that's all. Something that's happening to someone else. I'm not there. It's like having lost oneself."

There was something a little pitiful in her voice now. Did she find it easier to talk with these veils of moonlight between them, he wondered.

He raised himself and took her face between his hands; kissed her eyes. Her head between his hands was like a golden flower, too heavy for its stalk. It occurred to him that now, in this moment of her tentative approach to him, was his chance to get back on her for all the humiliation she had heaped upon him when he had tried to draw near to her; now she was at his mercy; now he could humiliate her utterly, send her away, so that even she could not go with dignity. . . . Old wrongs beat in his brain, made a tumult in his blood; so easy now to laugh in that bewildered, piteous face, raise a barrier against her groping approach. The conflict, the passionate desire to go out more than half way to meet her, and the realisation that for the first time she had placed herself in a position in which he could hurt her, sapped his nervous energy. There was again that sense of collapse within him. In her own way she had defeated him once again.

He turned away from her. "Isabel, I don't know what to say to you—you destroy me."

She laughed softly, a little shakily at that. "Gilbert, how young you are!"

Surprisingly she reached out and took the hand nearest to her, leaned her head against his shoulder.

She said in a low, curiously vibrant voice, "Gilbert, to-night I think my lost self has wandered back to have a look at its old home, and it's such a cold house to come to . . . Gilbert. . . ."

The golden head was turned in against his breast, the cold arms crept up and clung to him.

"You're trembling, Gilbert. . . . Crying?" Was there a fugitive suggestion of triumph in her voice?

"No. . . . Yes. . . . I don't know. It's just nerves. You

tear me to pieces. I've wanted so much for you to do just this, and I dared not think you ever would. . . ."

"Perhaps," she whispered, "we're both dreaming."

And in the morning, wakening to find himself alone, and the door between them closed, he remembered that, and wondered if the miracle of that night had been nothing but a dream. But turning up the pillow he found the impress of her head and a golden thread of her hair.

He telephoned down to the concierge and ordered him to secure roses to be sent up to her. *Subito!* And red roses. They must be red.

He bathed and dressed hurriedly in order that he might be ready first and await her on the balcony in the sunshine.

She came an hour after he was ready. She looked cool and exquisite in the pale green of which she was so fond, and which contrasted with the bright gold of her hair and emphasised the colour of her eyes.

She said, "Thank you for the flowers. What time do we leave here?"

He answered, "Not until after lunch." He went up to her and caught both her hands to his lips. He smiled up at her, boyishly, eagerly, but her eyes were green ice.

She said, "In that case I will go and write some letters," and stepped back into the room.

When they started for the Lido he noticed that she had not brought the roses with her.

He said, "You've forgotten your flowers—I'll send the porter up for them."

She answered, "I didn't forget them. The chambermaid admired them so I gave them to her. They wouldn't have lasted, anyhow."

He did not answer. What was she trying to do? Make him understand that last night had to be regarded as nothing but a sentimental lapse, or an act of pity that was in no wise to be taken as a precedent? If that were so, then it was her master-stroke of cruelty, because now forever he would be haunted by the living memory of that sweetness it was in her to give, and which she withheld from him.

There was in him now a despair blacker than before, so dark that the brilliance of the Venetian day hurt him with its garishness. The black prow of the gondola dipped into the sapphirine sea; behind them lay the miracle of Venice, shimmering rose and ivory in the opalescent heat-haze; ahead of them, a glimmering line of light and gold, the Lido. So beautiful it all was, and heartless, something treacherous in its delicate painted loveliness; the treachery of the mirage; the treachery of the beautiful, incredible miracle that compels belief and then shatters it. . . .

Well, they were leaving it and going to the playground of millionaires and mannequins, divorcees, derelicts and dilettantes; abandoning beauty for celebrities, cynicism and sophistication. Perhaps, he told himself with a weary bitterness, it was as well.

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LIDO LIZARDS

RECLINING on a pile of green and gold cushions, wearing green satin pyjamas embroidered with golden dragons, smoking an exotic cigarette in a long shagreen holder, and drinking *crème de menthe* as part of the colour scheme, Poppy Merrill looked at Gilbert sitting cross-legged on the sand beside her, and remarked thoughtfully that if she drank any more she thought she would be sick. Gilbert replied gloomily that it made him feel sick to see her drink any of it. Whereupon she abandoned her glass in order to have a free hand to ruffle his hair. The other was occupied in supporting a parasol cunningly fashioned of green feathers.

"You're terribly good-looking, Gil," she volunteered.

"And you," he said, "are a first-class vamp."

Whereupon Poppy wriggled close to him on her cushions and tilted her parasol so that it included him in its hot shade. She allowed her free hand to rest over his in the sand.

But he was scarcely conscious of her. Something in him was remarking, "So this is the Lido!"

He wondered why people came there; it was so much more beautiful in Venice. Yet people crowded in their thousands from two continents to this narrow strip of sand to lie about, thick-clustered as swarming bees, under a veritable forest of sun-umbrellas, flaunting fantastic pyjamas or bathing costumes, or an oiled and sweating semi-nudity, upon mattresses and cushions of all descriptions. All this sun-bathing *en masse*, all this display of bodies that were better not displayed, all the silly vanity and pretentiousness and pose of it, pearls and pyjamas, nudity and narcotics; peers and parasites, cocktails and cocottes. . . . The shameless pursuit of the Press photographer. Humanity at that vanity fair appeared to be divided into only two classes; those who were photographed whether they liked it or not—only they all seemed to like it, to invite it—and those who paid to be photographed. There was something pitiful about it, when you thought about it, all these people with so much wealth and the whole lovely world to choose from, all the mountains, and the forests coming down to the sea, and the lonely lovely shores, crowding on to this

narrow strip of sand because it was the fashionable thing to do. What was this great god Fashion that it could so control its thousands and so drug intelligence? Everywhere one looked, pearls and pseudo pearls, bizarre costumes, and gleaming brown bodies glistening with oil. He was so tired of bodies! There were people who wrote to the papers and claimed that all this sort of thing was 'immoral,' by which they meant that it was stimulating to the sex instincts; if they only knew how appallingly *unaphrodisiac* it all was!

Far out in the hot sparkling blue two scarlet heads were bobbing. Rex and Isabel. They appeared to be swimming towards the shimmering mirage of Venice in the distance. When he had asked her to swim with him earlier in the morning, Gilbert brooded, Isabel had said that she did not feel like it, and he had gone in alone; then Rex had come down from the hotel terrace, with a poisonous-looking pink drink in one hand and a caviare sandwich in the other, and asked her if she felt like a swim, and she had gone with a smile. Poppy had watched them thoughtfully but made no comment. She stole a glance at Gilbert now and broke in upon his brooding reverie.

"You needn't be so darned loquacious, Gil. This is your honeymoon, you know. How does it feel being married to a Merrill?"

"You married one. You ought to know."

"I was asking you." She sat up in order to be closer to him, and became confidential under the green parasol. "What was the big idea in marrying Isabel, anyway, Gil? I've often wondered."

"Does there have to be a reason?" He did not feel in a mood for talking to Poppy.

"Always. Love, lust, or lucre. It couldn't have been the latter, I guess, and I can't imagine it being the first, and if it was the second I guess you were sold."

"There are other motives for marriage, I suppose."

"Marrying for a home and children and all that?" She laughed. "That's the last thing in the world anyone in their senses would marry a Merrill for, surely! They don't run to families. The family dies out with this generation unless Rex and I have children. Anne's having any, if she does when she marries, doesn't help the Merrills, whatever it does for the Hardings."

"Do you want children?"

"A son, yes. Not that there's much of the maternal instinct about me, but there's got to be an heir to the title, and a girl gets kind of lonely married to a husband who's never there."

"There are other men—with your money you can do as you like; he'd never divorce you."

"Naughty! Putting ideas into a girl's head. A girl can't be a sort of walking brothel—though lots of 'em are, these days."

"I simply hate your expressions, Poppy."

"I simply hate a lot of things, but I have to put up with 'em. If I have a son I shall call him Gilbert."

"That's very complimentary of you." He smiled in spite of himself.

"Oh, you needn't get swelled head, I'm not at all likely to have a son."

"I don't see why not."

"That's because you haven't studied the Merrill family tree. I have, and the family is dying out, I tell you. Look how it goes. Isabel is an only child—and a girl at that. Rex and I don't look like having any children, and Isabel won't. You'll see."

Gilbert frowned. "Really, Poppy, this discussion is impossible!"

"Maybe. I'm telling you, that's all."

"Thanks for the information." He heaved himself up out of the sand.

She smiled up at him under the green parasol. "Now he's all offended, bless him!"

"I'm not—but I hate your mind as much as your expressions."

She laughed outright at that. "Is that so? What's wrong with my mind, anyway?"

"It's—pornographic."

"Sure, Honey, and isn't that the most amusing kind of mind? But don't go. Here come the water-babies. Organise a thirst-quenching expedition, Gil, there's a lamb."

But Gilbert had ceased to listen. He was gazing at Isabel. How beautiful she looked walking up the sand in her short wet scarlet suit! She had pulled off the scarlet cap and shaken her golden hair loose, and the sun burnished it to a bright flame.

People looked up as she approached, and their eyes followed her after she had passed. The sand was strewn with beautiful women, like exotic sea-flowers washed up by an enchanted tide; but she had more than beauty; she had grace and poise, and some indefinable quality that emanated from her like the lustre from a diamond, like electricity from a tourmaline. And she was his wife! Not the wife of the brown and golden god-like young man who walked behind her with a similar poise and arrogance, but the wife of Gilbert Stroud, of the Stroud and Son Company, Montreal, and Stroud's Tours, Ltd., London.

"Simply too marvellous," Rex remarked as he came up. But he was referring to his swim with Isabel, not the fact that she was the wife of Gilbert Stroud.

"A little drop of we-know-what mixed as only Alphonse knows how, would be still more marvellous, I guess," drawled Poppy. She looked from her husband's golden head to Isabel's. The cousins were of the same height as well as similar in the regularity of the Merrill features and colouring, and both wore scarlet one-piece bathing-suits, and were similarly slender.

"You look ridiculously alike, you two," she remarked. "You might be brother and sister. Or Adam and Eve. I don't quite know which."

"Split the difference and make it the Dolly Sisters," Rex suggested, and to Gilbert, "Why don't you and Poppy go on up to Alphonse and order cocktails—Anne and Trevor will be up there, and Isabel and I will come on when we're dry."

But Poppy for one was not so easily disposed of. She said, easily, "Oh, there's no hurry. We'll wait until you've sunbathed yourselves dry. Come and sit here under my sunshade, Rex."

Rex lay down sulkily a little distance from her, whereupon she dragged her cushions over to him and sat beside him, running her hands through his hair.

Isabel dropped down on the sand beside Gilbert. He made a pillow of her rolled-up beach-wrap for her and she lay back, her eyes closed against the sun.

He lit a cigarette and asked casually, "Did you enjoy your swim?"

"It was heavenly! This place is always my idea of Paradise. I could stay here for ever."

"I am sorry about that, because we are returning to London to-morrow."

She sat bolt upright at that. "Whatever for?"

"This place bores me to death; we've had six weeks of it. Isn't that enough? I've got business to attend to in London, for another thing."

"That's no reason why I should have to return to face a London summer." He was aware of the anger in her voice.

"You're my wife," he reminded her, "and this, strange as it may seem to you, is our honeymoon. People don't usually spend their honeymoons apart. It would look rather odd if you were to remain here by yourself, wouldn't it?"

"And what do you propose I should do with myself in Town with everyone away?"

He shrugged. "Whatever it is that women who have nothing in the world to do, do do with their time. We might have a house in the country somewhere where you could get all the riding and swimming and shooting you wanted. I've been thinking about it. If it was not too far out of town you could see all the people you wanted. You'd have more to occupy you than living in Town, perhaps."

The anger passed from her face, leaving it thoughtful.

She said, "Yes. We might do that. It's a solution."

But whether it was a solution of their married life, or merely concerning their return to England, it did not then occur to him to ask her.

OBSESSION

THE finding, decorating and furnishing of the country house occupied Isabel for six months. It was a Tudor house of grey stone, set in a hollow of the Sussex downs, near Lewes. It had two hundred acres of wooded land, which, as the estate agents expressed it, was 'admirably adapted for game'; a short drive brought one to the sea; there was a golf course on the downs above it and good hunting country all round.

The house had at one time been a farm-house, and what had been a whitewashed, stone-floored dairy Isabel had converted into a ballroom, with a parquet floor and painted walls in which flame merged through tones of rose and orange into pale amber. The erstwhile pantry opening out of it became a cocktail bar, with Piccassoesque mural decorations, and a bar that looked as though it had strayed from one of the newer of the Russian ballets. The farm-kitchen converted into a dining-room which still retained its timbered ceiling and inglenook, but developed a polished ebony floor, a circular alabaster table electrically illuminated from underneath, and with a miniature lily pool supporting lilies of painted glass with electric light bulbs cunningly concealed amongst their petals in the centre. The sideboard was also of electrically illuminated alabaster, and supported a bowl of coloured glass fruit above electric light bulbs; the painted walls blossomed with electric torches of opaque glass, and diffused lighting spread an orange glow over the timbered ceiling. The combination of this note of modernity with the Tudor ceiling and fireplace was considered very amusing by the Bright Young People who were always as thick about the place, when it was completed, as flies in summer.

There was a trigonometrical sitting-room designed by a futuristic young man responsible for some of the *décor* of the Russian Ballet, and whose idea of modernity was distorted perspective. The chairs had triangular backs and three legs; the tables were octagonal, and lest there should be any doubt about the decorative value of angles, an enormous octahedron of solid bronze stood in the specially built concave windows. All the furniture was black lacquer. Upon the white enamelled walls designs in terms of absolutism were stencilled in black. The door was a

drunken scarlet star; the curtains long transparent scarlet veils imposed on blue. The white enamelled ceiling rioted with black lightning like a madman's dream. The fireplace was a gargoyle in whose mouth glowed electric coals. People said it was simply *too* marvellous.

"Obscene, I call it," growled the Earl of Tringham.

It was the house of a woman who sought relief from a consuming boredom. It ceased to amuse her almost as soon as it was completed. Gilbert's reaction to it was merely one of gratitude that she had confined her outbreak of modernism to this house instead of allowing it to run riot in their town house.

Christmas intervened before it was completed, and they went to Cap Martin to stay at the exotic villa of the young decadent whose reminiscences dropped such fashionably tired petals. The housewarming of the country house did not take place until Easter, and from then onwards Isabel was rarely in Town. Gilbert went out to the house from Friday till Monday every week; he could have gone from Monday till Friday most weeks, for Stroud's Tours, Ltd., was safely launched and prospering, and he had little to do in connection with it beyond attend board meetings, but he went to the office every day and grappled with details that could have well been left to his entirely capable manager and staff, because there was upon him a fever to do something, to lose himself; he was a man who burned up his energies by an invisible flame; it was burning his life away.

He was obsessed by Isabel; she was the pivot now round which the whole of his world revolved. There beat always in his brain the sardonic mockery of his possession of this woman who was legally and physically his wife. Had she hated him, quarrelled with him passionately, answered insult with insult, he could have endured it; but there was always this cold indifference. Neither his passion nor his anger could touch her. When he caressed her there was always that weary distaste, that apathetic tolerance, that suggestion that although it was distasteful it did not matter very much; she suffered him, he knew, because it was her idea of giving value for money; the honesty which made it impossible for her to pretend, to simulate a passion she did not feel, made it equally impossible for her to deny him conjugal right of access.

When her indifference goaded his passion into sadism he knew that her innate contempt for him was even then too great for her to do more than despise him.

For the first few months of their life together he alternately sought by despairing passion and by resentful anger to break through the citadel of indifference in which she enclosed herself; but it was a beating of futile wings against impregnable barriers. Neither a lover's tribute of a rose laid in adoration on her breast, nor the bruising of her delicate skin under his frantic hands, as his distracted soul swept back and forth, despairingly, hammering alternately upon the doors of pity and of anger, could affect her. At every move she eluded him, and never was the hidden essence of herself so far from him as in his physical possession of her.

He would remind himself that in the beginning all that he had wanted was a wife who would do him credit, of whom he could be proud, the possession of whom in merely the material sense the world should envy him; frantically he would remind himself that this he had; he might comb all Europe and never find anyone more exquisite, who more exactly fulfilled the vision of that Florentine night. He had never intended to take love into his reckoning, and still he insisted to himself that he did not, that he was not in love with her, that he could more nearly approximate to love with Mary Thane than with this orchid of a woman, that he did not want love from her. To a very large extent, even after a year of marriage, this remained true; he still did not demand, or even expect, that she should love him, but whilst her spirit was so far removed from him his possession lacked completeness. It was possession that he had always wanted, that was the quintessence of his dream—and she robbed him of it. Always there must be some part of her, the very essence of her, that escaped him.

And because she robbed him in this way of his sense of power, he went to fantastic lengths in exaggerating what little she did afford him; he flaunted her beauty before the world with an arrogance that would have been offensive had it not been so pitiful. He had her portrait painted by the most expensive and fashionable portrait painters in Europe, one for the town house, one for the country house, one for his office, and always orchids were set

before these portraits, and day and night the electric light burned at the foot of the massive gilt frames.

He loaded her with jewellery; he employed a Press agent to keep the illustrated papers supplied with the newest photographs. He gloated over the inscriptions below these pictures reproduced in the Press, "Lady Isabel Stroud, the beautiful only daughter of the Earl of Tringham, and wife of Mr. Gilbert Stroud, the shipping magnate."

It was not that she was the only daughter of the tenth earl of Tringham that mattered, but that this exquisitely beautiful woman was his wife—that his were her breeding and distinction and beauty and rarity. Those moments when he walked by her side in any public place, or introduced her as 'my wife,' were the high spots of his life; it was for these moments of glory that he lived and was fulfilled. He savoured them with a savage intensity. He exaggerated the importance of the effect of her beauty until there were moments when he imagined that an audible gasp ran through a public building when he entered it, and when he imagined that crowds gathered about her car when she drove through the streets. If three people turned their heads to look at her when she walked or rode in the Park he imagined that she was being mobbed like a popular movie star, and would exult with the pride of possession. He would tell all his friends and acquaintances, at their houses, at his own, at the clubs he frequented, of how it was becoming embarrassing for his wife to leave the house because of the adulation of the public, and from deliberate conscious exaggeration and boasting he came to believe it himself. The thing became a mania. It grew upon him like a disease, and a superficial structure of almost delirious happiness and satisfaction would be superimposed upon his inner sense of defraudation and defeat.

Increasingly as time passed he lived in a fantasy world in which he was the passionately envied darling of fortune. He reached the stage when he imagined that whenever he entered a club or restaurant alone men nudged each other and whispered, in envious awe, "There goes Gilbert Stroud—he is married to the most beautiful woman in the world, Lord Merrill's daughter, Lady Isabel." And then he would raise his head still higher and strut and swagger.

He had come to that pitch in his mania when he was seriously

contemplating making gifts of her portrait, painted by the most fashionable painters, to every club of prominence in London, arranging for Lady Isabel wards in all the big hospitals, and of inviting all the leading novelists in the country to dedicate their forthcoming works to her, when there happened that disaster which restored him to sanity.

It was on the Saturday of that first Easter at the country house. A telephone message came through to him from the London office of Stroud's Tours, Ltd. It was his manager speaking, excessively apologetic for intruding business upon his chief's week-end.

After his apologetic preamble he said, "I thought I ought to let you know, sir. We have received two cable messages from the *Aquatic* at Las Palmas this morning. One of the deck-hands fell down an open hatch whilst cargo was being loaded on Thursday morning and broke his neck. The skipper cabled us right away, but it didn't arrive until after we'd closed Thursday night, and there was no one in yesterday, being Good Friday. The second cable, sent later, says, 'Inquiry held on board this afternoon. British Consul satisfied death accidental and no one culpable. Stop. Sailing for Santa Cruz to-night and burying body at sea. Stop. Passengers sympathetic but all efforts being made to avoid spoiling passengers' pleasure.' That's all in order, I think, sir. We have duly notified deceased's family. We can go into the question of compensation on Tuesday, perhaps, sir."

"Compensation be damned!" Gilbert said irritably. "If the bloody fool falls down a hatch and breaks his dam' neck, is that our fault? All right, all right, I'll be in on Tuesday."

He rang off irritably. If the fellow wasn't dead already he'd deserve the sack for his carelessness, mucking up a pleasure cruise like that. . . . God in heaven, if a fellow didn't know enough not to fall down an open hatch. . . .

It was not until he returned to the office on the Tuesday after Easter that he learned that the name of the bloody fool who had been so careless as to break his neck in the course of his duties on a pleasure cruise was Nicholas Stemway.

FUGUE

TORMENT heaped on horror's head was the suggestion of suicide which came out as a result of Gilbert's special interview with the captain of the *Aquatic* when she berthed at Liverpool ten days later. When he had gone, Gilbert sat alone in his office with the blue form spread out on the plate-glass of his massive mahogany desk, with all that that dapper little man with the quiet matter-of-fact manner had told him churning in his head until he felt that it must burst. He had added nothing to the precise statements as to the causes of death set forth in the long questionnaire of the blue form; he had merely added the corollary details, but those details set all the wheels of Gilbert's imagination racing. There were the details that made a 'regrettable accident' in the ship's log into an agonising personal tragedy. And yet he had been so unhysterical, so undramatic, that quiet, business-like little man. . . .

He told his story so simply, a mere repetition of the official report, with explanatory footnotes. They had berthed alongside at the port of Las Palmas, Gran Canaria at six o'clock in the morning of the Thursday before Good Friday. The accident occurred at the opening of the hatch by the deck-hands at eight o'clock preparatory to loading the cargo of bananas they were due to pick up there. In the general scramble of Spanish stevedores and deck-hands to descend into the hold Stemway missed his footing on the ladder and slipped.

"Stepped off into space, as you might say," Captain Anderson explained.

He was dead when he was picked up and taken into the ship's hospital. The British Consul was immediately notified and an inquiry held in the afternoon aboard ship. Evidence was given by those stevedores and deck-hands who had witnessed the accident, and also by the checking clerk of the company's agent at Las Palmas who was standing by the hatch at the time, but who had only a confused impression of what happened. None of the passengers witnessed the accident, as they were either at breakfast in the saloon at the time or had not yet left their cabins. The question of suicide was raised by the mate who was in the hold

at the time and insisted that Stemway jumped from the top of the ladder, but as no one else could be found to support this theory—"You couldn't call it evidence," said Captain Anderson—the inquiry resulted in a verdict of accidental death, and the British Consul signed the form accordingly. The general feeling was that if the unfortunate young man had contemplated suicide he would scarcely have pitched himself into the hold when there were such quantities of sea all round in which he might so much more tidily and surely ended his life.

The captain frankly admitted that the mate stuck to his point and insisted that deceased did leap, but, as the Consul himself pointed out, very few people can tell the truth exactly and unexaggeratedly about what they have or have not seen, and the stevedores and deck-hands on deck at the time would have a better view of what happened than the mate who was down below. It might have looked like a jump to the mate looking up, but the evidence of those on deck was much more likely. There was nothing at all, Captain Anderson insisted, to support the suicide theory, and misadventure was obviously the only possible verdict. Deceased had not been depressed, in fact only the day before he had joined in a fo'c'sle concert. It was, after all, his first voyage, and skipping over the side of the hatchway and scrambling down into the hold by way of slippery iron vertical ladders are not as easy as they look to the inexperienced. And the Consul was entirely satisfied. Oh, entirely.

At first everything possible was done to keep the news reaching the passengers, but passengers sense anything like this on a ship, and it is impossible to keep officers—particularly young officers—from talking; there was the arrival of the Consul in the afternoon, and, when rumours began to get about, it was thought better to make an official statement to the passengers. The body was buried at sea in the early morning between Las Palmas and Santa Cruz. A dance arranged to take place on board when the ship berthed at Santa Cruz was cancelled, but leaving Santa Cruz, the purser held a meeting, attended by the passengers, and urged that no good could be done by brooding over this sad accident; they had all to be together for another ten days, and it was proposed that a whist-drive be held in the saloon that night to take everyone's

minds off the tragedy. He respectfully put forward this suggestion to the passengers' sports committee, who heartily endorsed his remarks.

"We soon got things going again," said Captain Anderson. "The days are long at sea. The passengers raised a collection for the young man's mother. I think that's all, sir, and that everything is satisfactory."

And Gilbert had answered, "Oh, yes, Captain, everything is quite satisfactory. Everything appears to have been conducted quite regularly. Thank you, Captain."

"Thank *you*, sir," said Captain Anderson, and departed as briskly as he had arrived, leaving Gilbert alone with the precise blue form and his imagination. He knew exactly how it would all have been, and how it was, the hysteria and the sentimentalising, the morbid curiosity, the inevitable reaction. For, as the captain said, the days were long at sea, and this was a pleasure cruise. By the time the *Aquatic* left the Canaries the attitude of the entire ship's company would have veered round to that of feeling that the carelessness of the young man who fell down the hold was inconsiderate to a degree. To be ill or die upon a ship is like being ill or dying in an hotel; it offends against the ethical code; it is like being sick in a drawing-room; it is 'not done'; it is anti-social. Of course, it was all very sad, the ship's company would have told each other in the smoke-rooms and lounges, and sun-basking in their deck-chairs on the promenade deck, but it wasn't their fault; "we did all we could," they would say, in effect and perhaps in so many words, "and now it's all over, and after all we came away to enjoy ourselves." And that subscription would have squared their unconscious callousness with their consciences. "Poor boy! How sad for his mother!" they would say, and inevitably some one would add, "They say she's a widow!" The mothers of young men who come to unfortunate ends, particularly in ships, are always widows, and in need of financial aid.

For the rest of the cruise the covered hatch would exercise a persistent fascination for the passengers. . . . Gilbert could see them when cargo was taken on board at Cadiz, crowding round the gaping hold, speculating upon just how the disaster might have occurred. If anyone had suggested that they were waiting

to see another man fall in, he thought bitterly, they would have been horrified, nor recognised their horror as the horror of minds resisting with moral indignation the acceptance of an unpleasant truth. . . .

Day after day Gilbert Stroud sat in his office in Cockspur Street going over and over that blue form, searching frenziedly for some point he had missed before and which would allay this unbearable thought that Stemway had taken that leap into the dark deliberately. He would press his fingers against his eyes in an effort to shut out the pictures that passed and repassed before his brain, emblazoned in flame. Something cried out in him incessantly, a tom-tom beating in his brain, reverberating down all the labyrinthine ways of mind and spirit, "Stem! Stem! Stem!"

In the recurrent intervals of his fitful nights, between sleeping and waking, that name was lightning that zigzagged in a blackness that was within and without; in the darkness of his room and the greater darkness of his soul that name was blazoned. Sleep would come with the wan grey hours, and he would waken unrested and with a dull uncomprehending sense of disaster; as consciousness crept about him and reality asserted itself, he would remember. Stem, who had been so vitally and intensely alive, was dead; gone out deliberately to seek death upon one of the ships of the friend who had failed him. Always that thought crept up to him, and always he smote it down, but he could not kill it; it was always there, waiting round the corner to creep out on him when he was off guard.

And always there was in him a sort of frenzied secret weeping, and something in him crying out in its agony, "You always mattered more than anything, Stem; you were in my imagination as no one has ever been or can be, but life does things to one. . . . I failed you and my failure defeated me; it defeated us both. I got so far away from you, Stem, and I thought I could come back when I wanted, but it was like a tide that comes in when one walks far across the sand, and when one tries to return one finds oneself cut off. . . ."

He talked to Isabel because he had to, though he knew she would not understand. His life had become nothing but this agony that churned in his brain and would not let him rest.

"The last thing he ever asked me to do I failed him. I was always failing him," he said, over and over again.

Isabel said coldly, "If he meant so much to you, why did you?"

He could have killed her for that. He could not explain to her that life was not as simple as all that. What could she know of the conflict that destroyed lives? He wanted to say to her, "My mind—soul—spirit, call it what you like, wanted Stem and our friendship; there was that sense of communion between us; but something in me more profound, more insistent, wanted you and had to have you, because you, not the personal you, but what I wanted of you, were there in my dreams before the lines of my life and his were drawn together in one pattern. All the best of me I wanted to give to him, but something in me drained away all that I had to give into a channel of selfishness. Always it was my selfishness that made me fail him."

But he could not tell her, because he was not close enough to her. He went to Mary, and though she could not comfort him she afforded his despair a refuge. He paced her room and she let him talk.

"I can't understand it—what he was doing there in one of my ships. I keep seeing him down there in the bowels of the ship, with men he couldn't talk to, living that horrible life, and that queer look of defiance and despair in his eyes, and his body taut, the way it was that day at Parchim when he struck the German officer. I keep seeing the hatch, and the crane swinging over, and the sky and the sea so blue—the southern blue that he loved—and then Stem stepping off into the dark. And his body crumpled up at the bottom of the hold, lying there in the darkness like a dead rat, and all the faces peering down from the deck, and the Spaniards jabbering. That he should have gone through the war and Parchim to come to that! All the time there's something shouting in my mind, Why? Why? Why?"

His forehead was wet with sweat, and his eyes had that crucified look he had seen in Stemway's that day at the prison camp; his soul was crucified upon a cross of spiritual agony.

Mary said, "Why don't you go and see his mother? You say he wanted you to—why not go now? She would be glad to have you there—her son's friend. And she probably knows why he

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went to sea—in one of your ships. She could possibly help you, and you could perhaps comfort her a little.”

“Of course! Why didn’t I think of it? But I couldn’t think of everything. Stem’s mother! Of course! You’re so wise, Mary. What would I do without you?” He was down on his knees, then, beside her chair, kissing her hands in a passion of gratitude. His eyes had the hard, bright, hot look of fever.

He could not wait until the morrow; he sent a telegram to Mrs. Stemway to announce his coming, and went that afternoon, and by the evening was walking up the flagged path between the hollyhocks to the little grey stone house among the Cotswolds.

When the door opened to him he did not hear. He stood there gazing across the lawn at the side of the house. Beyond the lawn flowed the stream, and Stem’s boat lay there drawn up on to the grass. The stream where they were to have skated at Christmas; where they were to have bathed last Easter, before the mists were off the hills or the dew from the grass. And there beyond the garden was the long white road where, Stem had said, they would walk dreaming of the Appian Way and Tivoli. . . . Tivoli. . . .

The gentle, friendly, reproachful landscape blurred before his eyes.

“Stem, oh, Stem!” The cry was wrenched out of the innermost recesses of his soul in a great sob.

There was a light touch upon his arm, and he spun round to face the living incarnation of Stem himself.

Stem’s mother was a little woman who seemed taller than she was, by reason of her carriage, her way of holding her head high, a little thrown back. There was the same arresting, indefinable quality about her; the same dark intense eyes, straight black hair, mobile mouth, a little sensitive, a little sardonic; the same suggestion of tautness and awareness about her body, as though she lived always spiritually a-tip-toe for the adventure of living. He noticed with relief that she did not wear black, but a little quaint dress and coat gay with bright embroidered flowers.

She said, in a low husky voice that was almost unbearably like Stem’s, “I’m glad you’ve come; I was going to write to you. Come in.”

She led the way into a bare, simple room with pale walls and

dark oak furniture and woodwork. He had an impression of bright brass and bronze before the red brick fireplace flanked by bookshelves. A bowl of daffodils was like a golden fire upon the dark polished table. There was a curved window recess where fuchsias and scented ivy geraniums blossomed on an inside sill.

"Shall we sit here?" Her voice was quiet and composed. "I'll make you some tea. You'll be tired after your journey."

"No—please—I couldn't take tea just now. Let's talk first."

She sat down and he seated himself opposite her.

"You're so like him," he said, "I want to go on looking at you."

She met his eyes steadily, but there was something pitiful in her own. She said, "He always wanted you to come here. He was so happy and excited about it last Easter. He was always writing from Rome about Gilbert Stroud coming to stay for Easter. And then you didn't come."

There was curiously no reproach in her voice; she merely stated facts. He could not go on watching those piteous eyes.

He leaned his arm on the window-sill and his head on his arms. He must talk without looking at her.

He said, "I wanted to write. But there wasn't anything left to say. I felt that something was destroyed."

"For him, too. He couldn't settle in Rome after that. He wrote that he met your ghost at every corner. In the summer he couldn't stand it—'these long hot Roman afternoons,' he wrote, 'they're so terribly empty.' He went to Spain and tried to join the Spanish Foreign Legion, but they wouldn't have him. He got work in a shipping office in Barcelona. He used to see your ships there. At Christmas he came home. You and Lady Isabel were at Cap Martin—we saw your pictures in the illustrated papers."

"We were back in England by the end of January."

"He went to London in February. He got a job in another shipping office."

"And he never let me know!"

"I used to write and ask him why he didn't let you know he was in London, but he said it was no good; that it was all over London how you were idolising your wife and lived only for her;

he met people who knew you, do you see, being in the shipping world himself. He was afraid that another encounter would be as unsatisfactory as the last had been. He said he couldn't take the chance, because if you let him down again he didn't know what would happen to him. I didn't know until he had sailed that just before Easter he had signed on as one of the crew for the Easter cruise of the *Aquatic*. The first news I had was a card from Lisbon. He wrote that he was depressed and had to get away from himself. He wrote that he had 'touched bottom' at last. It was the last I ever heard from him—until the news from Las Palmas."

She pulled a handkerchief out of the coat of the quaint little jacket gay with flowers, and mechanically wiped away the tears that had been streaming down her face all the time she had been talking. It was pitiful to see her sitting there speaking so quietly and composedly, and yet with the tears pouring down her face; pitiful to watch the fine thin nervous hands plucking at the edge of the handkerchief, to sense the awful shuddering sobs that went on suppressed inside that erect, taut body.

"He squandered his emotions; he felt everything too deeply, and the war did something to him; he had shell-shock, and he had always been highly strung. At Oxford before the war he wanted to enter the Church—he felt everything so intensely, you see."

"I know. He told me."

There was a little silence, then she said, "We had all his love—his mother and his friend."

"And his friend failed him."

"Yes." She did not exonerate him, nor spare him, the little tragic thing in her quaint gay clothes.

"I couldn't help it. I loved him." Something in him sobbed its life out as in her.

"No, you couldn't help it. It's as though people can't help hurting those they love. Peter loved Christ and betrayed him thrice. Judas too, and he died of remorse. It's as though we want to give selflessly but aren't big enough."

Gilbert Stroud buried his face in his hands, and the voice in him went on in its agony.

"Stem! Stem! Stem!"

"Life does something to one," he whispered.

"Yes. Ugly, bruising, hurting things. Betraying things. We're not big enough to stand against them. Nicholas wasn't—they destroyed him; you aren't—but they don't destroy you—they ride roughshod over you and leave you to get up again."

He slipped from his seat and hid his face in her lap; his arms went round her.

"Stem's mother . . . how you understand things. . . ."

He sobbed now, unashamed, his head in her lap.

And she bent over him, this woman whose son he had destroyed, and her voice as well as her hands caressed.

"You're so alike," she crooned. "It was because of that he felt this friendship so deeply. I can understand because I understood him. I lived for him, you see; he was not just something that grew out of my body; his soul grew out of my soul as well; we were a part of each other. My son! But more than that—he was part of myself. He and his father never understood each other any more than his father and I; we turned to each other; we were always so close, so close; and you did not come between us. I can't explain how it was; it was our oneness, I suppose, nothing could come between us. It was why he wanted us to meet. . . . You mustn't grieve, my dear. Life gives and takes away and gives again. I tried to tell him that, but he was so young and passionate and bitter, he wouldn't understand—but he's gone back into the infinite now, and he'll know. . . ."

She, too, was weeping softly now, and they clung together, those two who had loved Nicholas Stemway.

A little later they stood together in Stem's room. The white walls and plain furniture struck a curiously monastic note. Above the mantelpiece, the only picture on the bare walls was an etching of the Trinita de Monte.

"We bought it together in the Via Sistina," Gilbert whispered.

Stuck into a corner of the frame was a snap Stem had taken of him on the Pincio; he leaned on the balustrade, laughing. Afterwards, Gilbert remembered, they had sat on the high terrace of the café looking out over the city and drunk Dubonnet. In the opposite corner was a snap he had taken of Stem by the ruined temple at Tivoli. He had caught him in the act of sweeping his

hair back from his forehead. They had laughed together over the picture afterwards.

"It's difficult to tell which of the ruins is meant for me," Stem had said.

It was in this room that Gilbert dared to ask the question he had not thought he would have the courage to ask, in spite of his desire.

"You know what was suggested at the inquiry?"

"Yes. That it might be suicide."

"What do you think?" He dared not look at her.

"Only that whatever it was it had to be."

He stared at her incredulously, then:

"You—Stem's mother—a fatalist?"

She pressed the hand he laid upon her arm and smiled sadly.

"No, my dear, a philosopher."

He could have kissed every flower upon her clothes, the little brave tragic thing in the gay coat and jacket her son had brought from Rome.

Instead, he kissed her eyes to shutter for a moment their piteous courageousness.

He returned to London that night without waiting to see Stem's father. He did not want to meet this man who had so little part in the life of his son, or of his son's mother. He wanted to carry away with him the untouched memory of that mother whose life was so closely knit into the texture of Stem's own, and through whom he felt himself to have drawn nearer to Stem after his death than ever in his turbulent life.

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VII

DEFEAT

I

HIS visit to Stem's mother had a profound psychological influence upon the complex mentality of Gilbert Stroud, and in a large measure served to destroy a great deal of the conflict concerning his reactions to women which had begun in him as a child. If Stem had not died tragically as he had, Gilbert would not have met his mother. In retrospect it would seem as though all the encounters that had led from the uncomprehended contact in the German prison camp up to the disaster at Las Palmas led up to that point at which he could put his head down in a woman's lap and feel his spirit flow out to her free of all conflict.

The purely asexual nature of his encounter with Stem's mother was what he needed. Her gentleness and understanding were healing ointment laid upon that scar on his soul symbolised by the physical scar on his wrist. She was the mother he needed and had never known. He wondered for the first time about his own mother, and whether she would have been at all like Stem's mother had she lived, and whether there would have been that communion of spirit between them that flowed through Stem and his mother, and himself and Stem; he liked to think so. Women were no longer his enemies, to be got back upon, or to use, as he had so often used Mary, as a medium through which he might express his contempt of them, or his resentment of the humiliation they could heap on a man.

Because of the peace, and the new hold upon life, that one woman had given him, unspoiled by any conflict, its texture woven of nothing but simple love and understanding, he had no longer any need to revenge himself upon women in general, for all the hurt they had done to him was little beside the great healing comfort that one had given him when his need was greatest.

Now he could go to Mary with nothing but love and gratitude in his heart.

"I've been beastly to you, Mary," he said remorsefully, visiting her after that interview with Stem's mother, "and there isn't anything I can do to make up."

She sought to reassure him. "You haven't been beastly,

Gilbert, when you've hurt me it's only been because of the hurt and unhappiness in yourself. I always knew it was that, so there wasn't so much hurt."

"There shouldn't have been any, you dear thing."

She smiled, tenderly. "There shouldn't be any in life, then we should none of us hurt each other. Don't think about it, dear; life's not very easy for any of us, I suppose, but it's up to us to make a job of it, hoping for a little happiness in the process, and keeping the flag flying if it doesn't come to pass."

"Poor flag! It gets a little tattered by the end of the journey."

"That's no reason for abandoning it—aren't all the most interesting banners in the world the ragged ones?"

It was always so she comforted him in the moments when he faltered—and there were a good many of them.

His attitude towards Isabel remained still one of intense pride in proprietorship, he still said, "my wife" with a touch of arrogance, but his pride had ceased to be a mania. With the toning down of that fever, however, it seemed to him more than ever important that they should get close to each other in some mental and spiritual intimacy. There was more of grief than of resentment in his reaction to Isabel's coldness now that he had glimpsed the tenderness and communion of spirit possible in human intercourse. He tried alternately to woo her by the violence of passion and by the insidiousness of tenderness, but she remained persistently emotionally anæsthetic where he was concerned, and any manifestation of tenderness bored her if it did not escape her notice.

A few months after Stem's death, in the second summer of their married life, he tried to find the key to his wife's personality through her father. Isabel was in the country, and he invited Lord Merrill to lunch with him at his club.

He said, "I want to talk to you about Isabel. Do you realise that we have been married over a year now, and that I know as little of her as in the beginning? I can't get through to her. I don't understand. She's an unknown quantity to me."

"Perhaps there's nothing to get through to, young man. She's a Merrill, you know. People say, 'But they must be human underneath.' But supposing there isn't any underneath, nothing but the shell? Eh, young man, how about that?"

"I don't understand, sir. Even a Merrill is flesh and blood—must necessarily have some sort of human reaction to human issues—you were conceived and born the same way as everyone else, you, sir, conceived your children in the same way—you must have sex impulses and hungers and desires and dreams like the rest of us."

"Well, we all eat and drink and sleep and lust like everyone else—what more do you want? Isabel doesn't keep you at arm's length, I take it?"

"Of course not. But that's not everything. There's no mental satisfaction."

Lord Merrill laughed, that harsh dry laughter that had as much mirth in it as a fit of coughing. "You get mental satisfaction from things, my boy, not people. The mistake you young people make is expecting too much of your own kind. If you want mental satisfaction as well as physical satisfaction you must have a hobby as well as a wife or mistress. Collect etchings or antiques, or take to music, or become a patron of the arts—there are plenty of ways of getting mental satisfaction without expecting impossibilities from poor inadequate human nature. I'm not sure that there's any such thing as human nature. I rather think there's only nature—and nature is concerned with organic satisfactions, not mental ones."

"But there's a sort of need for mental and spiritual intimacy," Gilbert insisted. He tried to explain. "One must understand and be understood. Know a sort of human warmth."

"Try riding on the inside of a bus on a hot day during the rush hour," his lordship counselled, clasping his Napoleon brandy in its great globe lovingly in both hands that the warmth of his fingers might bring out the full fragrance of the bouquet. "A good old brandy is about the only thing I know of guaranteed to afford both organic and mental satisfaction," he added.

"I'm serious," Gilbert pleaded.

"By gad, young man, so am I! I'm all for warmth—central heating and a warmed globe for brandy, and mulled port. And as to understanding and being understood, what is there to understand? What shall we any of us know, ever, about anyone else? And half the time there isn't anything to know; what you see on

the outside—that's all there is to it. You young people fuss so much looking for the non-existent secret places of the heart that you walk right by the pleasant public places where you might stop and play and enjoy yourselves with each other."

"But it's necessary to establish some sort of mental intimacy before that's possible. Isabel and I can't be playmates, we can't be lovers, we can't be friends even—I don't interest her, and she doesn't allow me to come close to her in any but the physical sense. And mere physical possession when it's one-sided doesn't make people lovers."

"Why can't you accept her as she is without all this introspection? You've got a beautiful and distinguished woman who raises no objection to sleeping with you occasionally, and yet you're not content."

Gilbert realised that it was as useless trying to break through to any recognisable humanity in Lord Merrill as in his daughter. Perhaps Lord Merrill was right; perhaps there was nothing to break through to. He tried to adopt a philosophical outlook. He had married his physical ideal of femininity, and if being as beautiful as a Greek statue she was as cold as one, he must not ask too much of the munificent gods. When so many men had so much less, should he not be content with what he had? Was it Isabel's fault if there was some lack in her—could she, as she herself had said on their honeymoon, give a warmth that was not in her to give?

But there must be always something in him hungering and unsatisfied because of it. Still, he was a man consumed by an invisible flame.

2

They spent their second Christmas in the South of France as they had spent their first, though he yearned for the snows. Isabel suggested that she should go South alone whilst he went to St. Moritz, but no amount of reasoning on his own part or hers could make this idea acceptable to him. This time they took over the villa of the young man of the reminiscences—he having gone to America to lecture—and lived precisely the same kind of life as at their own country house, save that it took place on the Midi instead of in Sussex. Isabel refused to return to England until the

Spring, and Gilbert came back alone at the end of January. The news of his father's death in February brought Isabel back to him not from any feeling of compassion, but because his suggestion that she should accompany him to Montreal appealed to her.

John Stroud's death and the business issues resultant upon it which Gilbert had to handle made it impossible for him to entertain her as she understood entertainment, and after a week she travelled alone to meet Rex and Poppy in New York. Gilbert rushed through his business and joined her there three weeks later. In all his life he had never felt so utterly alone as during that period in Montreal. His father's death came to him as a mental shock rather than an emotional one. It was difficult to think of that virile, swaggering father of his as anything but intensely alive. He was not conscious of the sundering of any emotional ties—such ties had snapped long ago, when the war had lifted the scales of youth and illusion from his eyes, but there was something pitiful about going through the personal papers and possessions of the dead man, like turning over the leaves of the memoirs of his dead life and reading an odd, jumbled, formless story. What had he achieved, this father of his whom once he had hero-worshipped and sought to model himself upon? A little material power expressed in terms of ships and money; a great many futile love-affairs expressed in terms of tawdry romance and common lust. But he had had a lust for living, too, and enjoyed life. Perhaps that was where his real success lay, Gilbert thought, not in his business enterprises and his conquests of women. He had made of life a great gay swaggering adventure and left a son to perpetuate his name. . . . Perhaps a man who had done that much could claim to have lived successfully?

The sorrow that moved him at his father's death was bigger than a personal sorrow; it was a brooding sorrow over the muddled intricacies of the whole of human life; a sorrow that the Gilbert Stroud who had not known Stem's mother could not have felt. Such a pitiful little flash in the pan of eternity was this human life; it seemed so vast in the living and was so little in the cosmic scheme of things. There was such an immense loneliness to it all; the loneliness of birth and the loneliness of death, and all the queer loneliness of the soul in between.

He was in no mood for the noise and clamour of New York, but he endured a month of it to please Isabel, and they got back to England shortly before Easter. A Spring restlessness stirred in the air. Nature was fulfilling itself in an ecstasy of renascent life and procreation, and there burgeoned again deep down in the consciousness of Gilbert Stroud that desire for a son. More than ever important was it now that this dream should be realised, and not merely that the Stroud family might not die out, but that he himself might be fulfilled. Between himself and his son, blood of his blood, should be established that communion, those mental satisfactions, that had existed between himself and Stem, and which being broken off plunged him into this outer darkness of loneliness. In his son all desires should be realised and all dreams sublimated. Then Isabel's coldness would not matter; there would be his son upon whom to lavish the passion of love that the mother did not want, and which since Stem's death consumed him like a flame for want of outlet. The Strouds had always got what they wanted, and he had always believed in the power of the magnetism of desire, therefore that he and Isabel had been married some twenty months without Isabel conceiving a child was nothing; many people were married several years before children were born to them, and with Isabel's cold nature it might be, he thought, that she might not readily conceive.

If he could inflame her with a desire for a child equal to his own desire, might it not help? He thought so, since body and spirit and senses were so much one, interdependent. And if only Isabel had that child it might be, too, that she would draw nearer to him, for surely her coldness could not extend to the child of her body, and loving the child was it not possible she might care a little for the father?

But Isabel had not been very well on the boat coming over, and she did not improve when they were home. She was depressed and listless. She said that her nerves were on edge and that she wanted a change of air and scene. To please her they went to Paris. He stayed with her as long as he could, but his business required his presence in London; Isabel said she would remain on in Paris a little longer. Two days later she had gone into a nursing-home with appendicitis. He rushed back to Paris to be with her.

He felt that if she were to die he could not go on living; it would be the end of everything for him. It was during that period that threads of grey appeared at his temples, although he was not yet thirty. The faint lines that had appeared on his forehead in the emotional crisis of Stem's death deepened, and a network of fine lines emerged under his eyes.

Isabel did not die, and the dark Odyssey of the life of Gilbert Stroud swung on. There was the third summer of their married life, embracing Le Touquet and the Lido again; there was the autumn and Tringham Castle and the shooting; there was winter and those everlasting parties without which Isabel apparently found it impossible to live. That winter Isabel, surprisingly, announced that she was bored with the Riviera and proposed to remain in London. Poppy and Rex were over again, and there was Anne's wedding in December. It would be more amusing to remain in London, at any rate until the New Year.

Gilbert agreed. He, too, was bored with the Riviera. In London there was at least work in which to absorb himself, and there was Mary's blessed friendship. But now it seemed to him there was no longer any need to defer that discussion with Isabel that her illness had postponed earlier in the year. She had never looked more fit than she did that winter, and her listlessness and depression had completely vanished. There was a light in her eyes that he had not seen before, and a touch of colour in the natural pallor of her cheeks. There was a curious new vitality about her. He attributed it to the season's hunting and shooting, and it grieved him to see this new vitality acquired in the summer and autumn dissipated on the futilities of the winter season.

He said to her, therefore, one cold dawn as they drove back from a party Rex and Poppy had given at the beautiful house they had taken in Chelsea, "Don't you ever get tired of nothing but parties and amusements, Isabel? Don't you ever want to do something in life?"

She looked at him in the dim light of the car, her fine thin eyebrows raised. "What are you suggesting? That I should start a hat shop or a beauty parlour or something?"

"No, something infinitely more worth while as a career. Motherhood."

"A woman's oldest career!" Her voice was scornful.

"Don't be cynical, Isabel. Wouldn't you like a child?"

"Not particularly."

"It would give you an interest in life."

"My life is very well as it is."

"Mine isn't. It's empty—empty." His voice was bitter.

"That is scarcely my affair. We make our own lives."

"Not altogether. We're all dependent on each other. I want a child, Isabel, a son. If you wanted one it might happen. It's just possible, isn't it, that your body resists conception now because your mind does."

"Don't be ridiculous, Gilbert, and don't discuss things you don't know anything about—particularly when they are indelicate."

"Indelicate! You're the ridiculous one, Isabel. Since when were natural things indelicate?"

"Since man became civilised. If you want to go on talking you'll have to indulge in a monologue—I'm going to sleep."

She lay back in her corner of the car and closed her eyes, her head tilted back. He studied her cold, perfect face, the exquisite line of the stretched white throat, the soft gleam of pearls, the warm snow of ermine. So beautiful she was, and so cold. How could anything as warm as another human life grow in that statuesque body governed by that frozen soul?

But perhaps, he told himself, Nature would exert her own inexorable will; he must be patient. Perhaps in some fugitively tender moment—such as she had shown him one moonlight night in Venice—it might be possible for them to discuss the matter properly.

Curiously enough it was Poppy, at Anne Merrill's wedding, who reopened the subject.

She said, "Well, Gil, it may be true, as lady journalists who write for the newspapers keep on telling us, that marriage is a declining institution, but people go on getting married. I don't know whether it's the necessity for getting married before you can have the popular divorce that makes 'em do it. You're staying the course pretty well—what is it, two and a half years ago since you and I last stood about together at a wedding reception? It's taking you a long time to get started with that family we discussed

on the Lido all that time ago. Can't you convert Isabel to the sweet idea of being a little mother? "

"That's Nature's job, not mine."

"Are you so sure about that? " She looked at him slyly over the champagne glass.

"What on earth do you mean? "

"Oh, don't be so stuffy, Gil, we've got past the stage when we pretend that if children don't happen it's just nature. Nowadays, if a woman doesn't want children she doesn't have 'em."

Gilbert regarded her with distaste. "As I told you two and a half years ago on the Lido, and as you probably remember, since you're so good at remembering conversations that are better forgotten, you've got a revolting mind, Poppy."

He turned and walked away from her. Her malicious, amused laugh followed him.

He told himself that Poppy was simply one of those women who cannot attend a wedding without their minds running on sex, and who have a passion for discussing the undiscussable. Nevertheless, the seed she had dropped into his consciousness germinated with disturbing rapidity.

He recalled his conversation with Isabel in the car a few weeks ago; her refusal to discuss the matter; her candid admission that she was not interested in motherhood. Something in his mind recoiled in incredulous horror at the thought that she might be deliberately robbing him of that son in whom now all his dreams were centred, through whom alone his life might be fulfilled. She denied him love and common human intimacy of thought and spirit, surely she could not cheat him of this last dream which should redeem all those that had gone up in a smoke of futility?

3

There was no opportunity to speak to her until the dawn of the next day. After the wedding reception and luncheon, Isabel went on to a concert and Gilbert to the office; a conference kept him, and he got back to the house late and had to rush to get dressed for dinner. There were, as usual, guests for dinner, and more guests arrived after dinner, and it was not until the early hours of a new day that the last guest had departed.

When at last the house was quiet, Gilbert went into the fantastic room of sea-green silk and mother-of-pearl which had so often been reproduced in the illustrated weeklies and home magazines as 'the original bedroom of the beautiful Lady Isabel Stroud.'

To his annoyance he found that she was not alone; her maid was there. Peremptorily he sent the girl away.

When the girl had left the room Isabel regarded her husband with angry eyes.

"You are extremely impertinent, Gilbert."

He sat down in a shell-shaped chair, frowning. "It's time the girl was in bed, anyhow."

"Did you come here to tell me that?"

"No, to ask you something. I have been thinking about that discussion we had a few weeks back—coming home from Lady Rothcommon's party. You remember?"

"You're not proposing to start discussing that all over again at this time of the morning? I'm tired. You have a perfect mania for discussing unpleasant subjects."

He watched her sitting before her dressing-table, removing her bracelets, unfastening her pearls.

He said, "I'm sorry, but there was no other opportunity to talk to you. We never seem to be alone together. And this subject you consider unpleasant is immensely important to me. It is vitally important to me that we should have children—one child, at least."

She regarded him under half-closed eyes, superbly insolent.

"You once said that you wished to marry me in order that you might breed from good stock. You remember?"

"Yes. I was abominably rude. But you provoked me."

"But it was true?"

"Yes—not as crudely as you suggest—as my words suggested. The Strouds need new blood—I wanted the best. If I don't have a son my family dies out with me. You must see how important it is to me to have a son. If nature denies us, that would be tragic enough—but not to give nature a chance—that—that would be criminal, Isabel. . . . You must see that. And because you said you didn't particularly want a child, I wondered. . . . I want your reassurance, that's all. . . . If we had just one child. . . .

I'd be content if it were a son. . . . It's all I'll ever ask you to do for me—not to cheat me in this. . . .” His voice was unsteady; the words tumbled from him in a torrent. “If we had a son, Isabel, you could leave me if you wished and I'd give you all you wanted—income—houses—anything. I wouldn't try to keep you with me.”

“You'd have no further use for me? Is that it?”

The veins swelled and stood out curiously on his forehead. The scar on his wrist throbbed violently, keeping pace with the heavy plunging of his heart. “Isabel, no! If you knew how I wanted you in my life—how I want to keep you there! For God's sake don't torture me more than you need! I know you stay with me now purely for material reasons—why else? What I was trying to tell you is that if I have a son by you, you shouldn't have to do that—you should have all the effects without having to endure the cause—if it would make you happier, as I believe it would. I'd give you everything in the world you wanted that I could give—including your freedom, if you would give me just that one thing—a son.”

She laughed shortly, toying with the discarded string of pearls. “And that, my dear Gilbert, is the one thing I shall never give you.”

“Why? I don't understand. What do you mean?”

“I had appendicitis in Paris.”

“What has that got to do with it? You're quite strong again now. It doesn't affect a woman having children.”

“I suppose not. But I happened to go to Paris specially to have that operation for—appendicitis.”

He sat staring at her stupidly, resisting the realisation of her meaning that knocked at the door of his mind. It was something insolently triumphant in her face which forced him to open it.

He sprang up and went over to her, gripping her bare shoulders.

“You mean—it wasn't appendicitis at all?”

She burst out laughing, thin, malicious laughter. “Abortion, I believe, is the technical term.” She jerked her shoulders away from under his hands.

He stood there, gazing at her incredulously, horror creeping in his tormented eyes.

"You did that, Isabel?" His voice trembled and sank to a thick husky whisper. "You did that dreadful thing?"

She rose with an air of intense boredom and weariness and flung herself down on to a cushion-heaped couch and leaned back, smiling at him, watching him under half-closed eyes.

"Melodramatics, Gilbert? At this time of the morning?"

He saw nothing but that smiling mouth and those half-closed triumphant eyes.

"So you see, my dear, it's not a bit of use raising this delicate question again. I am not at all likely to give you a son—and you cannot divorce a wife for being—barren, I think they call it, don't they? So you see I win after all." She pummelled a brocaded cushion with long jewelled fingers that it might fit more snugly behind her head.

"I knew that by marrying you was the best way to get even with you for that insult about breeding from good stock."

He tried to raise his voice from that thick throaty whisper and failed.

"Is that the sole reason why you married me—to cheat me, deliberately?"

"Not the sole reason, no. But the determining factor, shall we say?"

He continued to stand there, swaying slightly, staring at her, stupidly, and over and over again in his head like rollers turned the thought, "Beaten, beaten, beaten." There was nothing left to say. There was a beating and a tightness in his head, a suffocating thudding in his heart, and reverberating in the throb of his temples, and turning, turning, in his brain, rollers turning in a red mist, that one word that was a thought, that thought that was a word, a word that beat like a drum, beating, turning, throbbing, drumming. Beaten, beaten, beaten.

And then quite suddenly as he stood there the rollers stopped. All that he felt was drained away into nothingness. It was as though the resistance of his mind crashed in before the full meaning of defeat. One was finished—utterly. Left with nothing to say, nothing to feel. As though one had died, standing up. A kind of spiritual oblivion that came to one without destroying physical consciousness.

He turned without a word and walked out of the room and into his own room, mechanically locking the door behind him. He sank down into an arm-chair and stared and saw nothing. He came out of that stupor, dully, as one emerges from an anæsthetic. All the impotent rage that had flamed up in him with a crescendo beating of drums collapsed and fell back upon itself; there smouldered now only the flameless embers, burning in him with a dull resentment, compost of humiliation and despair.

Beaten, beaten, beaten, all along the line; he, Gilbert Stroud, who had wanted so much, struggling high above the common carnival of passion and regret to reach to what he wanted. Now thought began to reassert itself; the pain began to creep in the numbed nerves. People who wrote, people like Mary—they had names for this sort of disaster; picturesque names; dead-sea fruit, they called it, and dust and ashes, and they pointed their little morals through their little metaphors. Here was life, then, imitating fiction. Mary should have the benefit of the little allegory. She would make a magazine story of it, perhaps, or even a full-length novel. Broken Dreams, she might call it. . . . And he dwelled on the thought with savage intensity, because he knew that it was a thought that slandered Mary. And now there was working again in him something that had been dead since that day in the Cotswolds, something he had thought annihilated, the desire to hurt someone, something, because of the frightful hurt in himself, the desire to get back on women again, any woman, for the the hurt a woman had done to him.

Isabel—you could not hurt her; but Mary it was easy to hurt. . . . She did not cry out any more than Isabel did, but you knew that she suffered as surely as you knew that Isabel did not; you watched her eyes till they were like great bruises on her white face, and it was as though you had struck her; it was as though you could see something bleeding there, inside her, behind her eyes. . . . And that eased something of the frightful bleeding going on inside yourself—the frightful, frightening, throbbing of that scar.

VIII

REFUGE

ALL through those grey months that led up to the Spring, Gilbert Stroud was a sick man, and only Mary Thane knew the nature of his malady. A year ago his defeat would have made him bitter, and still there were fugitive moments when he must wound Mary because of the hurt in himself, but for the most part he was conscious only of a great weariness and a deep consuming sadness. Sometimes he would look at Isabel with that strange new beauty upon her, and tell himself that what she had told him was not really true—that she had only been wanting to torment him; there were times when he recaptured his old pride in her, and he could almost persuade himself that Lord Merrill was right; he had much to be grateful for. But now Isabel withheld more of herself, refused him even the illusion of possession; where before she had been contemptuously indifferent, there was now a definite hostility in her distaste for him; and where before he would have welcomed hostility as something get-at-able, something he could combat, and upon which he could impose his will, now, with this great weariness and sadness in him, he could not cope with it. Their lives moved far apart now. He gave up trying to keep her pace. It seemed to him that they only met when they were entertaining, and they were never alone together.

Increasingly he turned to Mary. Over and over again he said to her, "You're all I've got," and she knew that it was true.

But Isabel robbed him even of Mary, as indirectly she had robbed him of Stem. She sent him a message by a servant one morning that she wished to speak to him. He was on the point of leaving for Cockspur Street—not because his presence was actually needed there, but because the office afforded a sort of refuge. He went up the stairs and entered her room. She was not yet up—she seldom rose before twelve—and leaned back on her bed amongst a pile of cushions. She was reading a letter as he entered.

There was a heavy scent of roses in her room. It seemed to him a long time since he had been in that room.

He said, "You wanted me?"

She laid down her letter. "Yes. Were you just going off to your woman-writer friend?"

"Isabel! What are you driving at?"

"You are seeing a great deal too much of that woman. Please don't flatter yourself that I'm in the least degree jealous, but people are talking—which is humiliating for me. If you must have a mistress, you at least owe it to me to be discreet about it."

"Isabel!" It was as though her name was torn out of the very bowels of his being. "It's preposterous! I've been utterly faithful to you—in spirit as well as in fact!"

She smiled that mocking, insolent smile. "My dear Gilbert, I am not in the least concerned as to your faithfulness or unfaithfulness. I am merely asking you not to humiliate me, that's all."

She kicked back the bed-clothes and sprang out, thrust her white narrow feet into high-heeled golden mules, sauntered over to the fireplace, where she stood, a slender lovely figure in the green and gold silk of her Lidoesque pyjamas, waiting for him to go.

He felt his soul shaken afresh by her beauty. It was always so with him; always it was as though he was seeing her for the first time.

He said, trying unsuccessfully to keep the tremor of emotion out of his voice, "There isn't anyone in the world I want or care about but you, Isabel. I'm sorry if my friendship with Miss Thane has caused you any embarrassment. It shan't in future."

She looked down at the fire. "Thank you." There was dismissal in her voice. He stood a moment, uncertainly, then turned and went out. He had promised to see Mary that evening because Isabel was going to a party that Rex and Poppy were giving; but arrived at his office, he telephoned her that he found after all he would not be able to come, and he made no suggestion regarding a future date.

Mary accepted the change of plan quietly. She said simply, "Come when you feel like it, Gilbert."

He could not tell her that he had got to learn to do without her. He began to accompany Isabel to interminable parties again, and from the day that Isabel spoke to him on the matter it was a month before he saw Mary again, and then it was sheer chance. He had been with Isabel to a luncheon at Poppy's and was driving back

alone to Cockspur Street as Isabel was going on in Poppy's car to a tea and cocktail party.

As the car turned into Sloane Square he saw Mary buying flowers from a flower-seller by the war memorial.

He tapped on the window and ordered the chauffeur to stop. He got out and crossed the road to Mary.

She looked at him over a great armful of mimosa and he saw a sudden rush of tears to her eyes. "Gilbert! My dear!"

He gripped her gloved hands. "Dear! Will you give me some tea?"

He dismissed the car, and once again the lift bore him up to Mary's rooms.

Her sitting-room was bright with Spring flowers. He had a feeling of having come home after a long journey.

Over tea he tried to explain to her. "I had to stop seeing you so much, Mary. People were beginning to talk. I didn't mind for my own sake, and I knew you wouldn't care, but there was Isabel to consider."

Mary was silent a moment, staring into the fire, and then she said in a low, curiously strained voice:

"It was because of Isabel two Springs ago that you failed your other friend for the last time, wasn't it? And you had failed him before because of her."

Gilbert did not answer, and she slipped from her chair and came and knelt between his knees, her hands on his shoulders. "Gilbert—she's never given you anything, are you going to let her rob you of what you have? If she takes even my friendship away from you, what have you got left?"

"Nothing," he whispered, "nothing," and held Mary against his heart. His silence conveyed more to her of his mental agony than anything he could say. And through her silence it seemed to him he could hear her soul weeping. More eloquently than any words, any recalling of the days when they had been lovers, her silence pleaded for their friendship, and he knew that it was not for herself that her silence pleaded, but for him, for it was true, as she had said, that if he denied himself the refuge and strength of her friendship, he was stricken utterly. . . . She did not need to tell him that she was all he had, the one precious thing

salvaged from his life's wreck in those seas of futility and defeat which engulfed him.

He stayed with her until the pale March sunlight melted into a grey half-light, and then he rose to go.

He took her in his arms and kissed her eyes with a kind of sorrowful tenderness. He said in a low voice, "Once when you told me you loved me, Mary, I told you not to. It was in the country, on an Autumn morning, do you remember? But now I need your love, Mary—more than you realise."

She answered with difficulty, a hand pressed to her aching throat, "No, Gilbert, not more than I realise."

He bent then and kissed her quivering mouth. He felt the tears on her cheeks and mingled with their kiss. And then abruptly he broke away from her and was gone, with no word of when they were to meet again.

All her life Mary Thane remembered the agony and tenderness of that kiss, for they never did meet again.

•

CRESCENDO

I

INCREASINGLY as the Spring wore on Gilbert's thoughts reverted to Stemway. And yet it was not so much that he consciously thought of him, as that all that had been vital between them crept back into his consciousness, and once again Stem was as fundamentally in his life as when he had lived, so that the horror of that disaster at Las Palmas evaporated and all that had been vital was resurrected with a curious sense of reality. It was strange, he thought, how much of importance in his life had happened in the Spring; he had been born in the Spring, and in the Spring had met Stem's mother, and in the Spring Stem had died. He hardly knew whether it was a sad or a lovely thing to die in the Spring.

He concentrated increasingly, too, upon his business. It was all that was left to him. His affairs were prospering. In the summer the first transatlantic Stroud liner would be launched. She was being built at Liverpool, and was to be christened the *Lady Isabel*, and Gilbert loved her profoundly. All his Stroud blood was stirred when he visited her at the shipbuilding yards, a skeleton growing to beauty daily. His ambitions now concerning his business were fantastic, staggering. It was not that he had any desire to be a millionaire ship-owner, but that more than ever now he was conscious of the Stroud organisation as a living thing gaining dimension and power under the direction of his will. He derived enormous satisfaction from the vast map modelled in plasticine which lay in the board-room of his offices at Cockspur Street, for he could stand by it and look down upon the mapped world and see at a glance where his ships were—and they were all over the world; they fascinated him, those tiny models of ships floating on their blue plasticine sea, with their different coloured flags, the blue flags of the cargo-boats, the blue and yellow of the Stroud cruising steamers, and presently, he would tell himself exultantly, his nervous fingers twitching upon the frame of the great map, there would be the blue and yellow and red of the Stroud transatlantic liners.

He was dreaming beside this map a few days before Easter when a clerk announced 'Mrs. Merrill.'

"I told her, sir, I didn't know if you were in," he added, discreetly.

"Oh, yes, show her into my office," Gilbert answered, and wondered what on earth Poppy wanted that she should call instead of telephoning him. But perhaps she was just passing. . . . People who have nothing to do always think that being in a state of 'just passing' is a good excuse for stepping in on and hindering those who have, he reflected.

As he entered his office a wave of perfume greeted him. Poppy, seated in an arm-chair drawn up by his desk, extended a languorous right hand.

"Hullo, Gil. I had to come here—it's the only place where we can get a chance of talking privately."

He thought she looked unusually lacking in vitality; there were deep shadows under her eyes and a tired note in her voice. Going the pace beginning to tell on her, he thought, and sat down, smiling at her across the vast desk.

"Well, Poppy, what can I do for you? Will you have a cigarette?"

"No thanks. You can't do anything for me." She paused a moment, looking at him. He knew then what was different about her; she had used less eye-black and lip-stick. Poppy must surely be very tired indeed. . . .

"I'm going to give you the shock of your life, Honey, so you might as well brace yourself for the bad news," she announced after a moment.

"I'm used to bad news," he told her. "It's the only kind I ever get."

"Well, this is going to be the worst you've ever had."

He smiled. "No, I don't think so." Was there anything else life could do to him? He didn't think so.

"But yes, I tell you. Take a deep breath——" She paused to give dramatic effect to her *pronunciamento*. "I'm divorcing Rex."

Gilbert was too startled to ask her what that had to do with him.

"Good Lord, Poppy, whatever for?"

"Oh, the usual. Adultery. It would simplify matters if you would leave Isabel at once."

"I don't understand. Why should I leave Isabel because you're divorcing Rex?"

"Because, my dear, dense, stone-blind Gilbert, your precious Isabel happens to be the co-respondent in the case. *Now* have you got the idea?"

He stared at her. Quite suddenly his mind refused to work. Poppy had said something more than usually crazy—something incredible—or had he only thought she had said it?

He had a sensation of groping in his mind. "My wife—co-respondent—Rex—what do you mean? You—I don't think I heard what you said——"

"Sakes alive! Is the man out of his wits?" Poppy was thoroughly exasperated.

"I said that I was proposing to divorce Rex for adultery with Isabel. They're lovers. I can't say it any plainer."

"Rex and Isabel?" Now his pulses, heart, temples began to pound like piston-rods. His mind became a racing engine to which incredibility tried in vain to apply brakes.

"Rex and Isabel?" he repeated, and then suddenly he laughed. Isabel with a lover? It was fantastic.

"Rot, Poppy, I don't believe it! It's just one of those disgusting bits of scandal that get about. Isabel hasn't the temperament for that sort of thing—she's cold as a statue. What on earth put such an idea into your head?"

"I've always suspected it. They were in love years ago, but they had to marry money, both of 'em, so Rex came to America and married me, and Isabel stayed at home and married you. They didn't see each other for years, but it appears they'd never got over each other. I suppose Isabel thought it would be safe to meet Rex again when she was going to be married herself, and with him safely tied up, too. Apparently it wasn't. Haven't you seen how their eyes change when the other's in the room? Isabel thought it would be a good idea to honeymoon on the Lido, didn't she? Rex and I had already planned to go there; she knew that. When your father died, Isabel thought it would be a good idea to go with you to Montreal—so that she could go down to New York where Rex and I were. And then Rex thought it would be a good idea to stop in London after Anne's wedding instead of going

south—and Isabel didn't want to go south either, did she? And I'll tell you why—because if we'd all gone south they wouldn't have had as many opportunities for being alone together as they get in London. Rex thought we ought to take a house here, and I took it—for a purpose. So that I could get to the bottom of this business. Well, I've got to the bottom of it, I tell you, and they're lovers, and I'm going to divorce him."

Gilbert had never seen anyone look like Poppy as she said this. Her face was horribly distorted with rage; he couldn't bear to look at it; he lowered his eyes, and they rested on her ungloved hands gripping her silk handbag; her long stained nails dug into the silk; he had a shuddering feeling that in the same way they would dig into the hearts of Rex and Isabel if they had a chance; they were somehow worse than her face, those long stained finger-nails digging into the silk. He had to look at her face again; there was a queer way her mouth was lifted at the corners, like an animal's, when snarling it bears its fangs; and her eyes were like the eyes of that woman in the great fresco of purgatory in the Doges Palace, he thought, an inferno of horror and anguish and fear and frenzy.

"Poppy—what are you saying? You're imagining things—they're cousins—naturally they're fond of each other and like to be with each other. That doesn't mean they're lovers. It's ridiculous—horrible. How can you possibly imagine such a thing?"

"It's not imagination, I tell you," Poppy stormed at him. "I stood it as long as I could because I wanted to keep Rex—I couldn't bear the thought that what I suspected might be true. I didn't want proof. But Rex's eagerness to stay in London after Anne's wedding got me—you'd already told me Isabel didn't want to go south this year. I couldn't stand it any longer—and I had him watched."

"Good God, not a detective——"

"Yes, a detective. What did you think? Did you think I was going to carry on forever in the rôle of the deceived wife? Did you think that I had no pride, no feeling—have him spending my money on some other woman? Living on me and making love to her at the same time. . . . What sort of a softie did you think I was? Yes, I had him watched. And I've discovered he's got

a service flat in Curzon Street, and she goes there. Appointments at hair-dressers or dressmakers she probably calls it to you. Oh, you needn't look like that! Put it to the test. Tell her you're going to be out to-night—ring her up—and then call round at Curzon Street."

"I couldn't—it would be beastly—sordid——"

"Well, isn't it beastly and sordid? My dear Gilbert, we both bit off more than we could chew when we married into the peerage, I can tell you. Blue blood and mongrel morals. I've had enough. I've been round to my solicitors this morning and papers are being served on Rex at that flat, where I suppose he'll live for good now—the servants have instructions that he is to be refused admission to the house. Isabel will receive her notification in due course citing her as co-respondent in the case. What are you going to do about it?"

But he could not answer. He spoke the thought uppermost in the surging chaos of his mind. "Isabel—does Isabel know what you've done?"

"I don't know. I expect Rex would tell her. She'd guess that I should tell you. You'd better go home and have it out with her. She'll deny it, of course. But that flat is going to take a lot of explaining in the divorce court."

He said desperately, "They can't prove that Isabel went there."

"It's up to her to prove that she didn't—that's going to be harder."

She rose. "I'll be going, Gil. I'm sorry to have given you such a shock; I've always liked you, and from the first I was sorry for you marrying Isabel. But you had to know about it sooner or later, and it would be simplest if you would petition for a divorce from Isabel at the same time. I've got over the worst of the shock now." She laughed, a short bitter laugh that hurt him somehow in spite of his own pain. "Oh, well, a woman used to remember her first love-affair, nowadays, I guess, she remembers her first divorce."

She gathered her fur cloak about her and moved towards the door. Mechanically he crossed the room to open it for her. There was something one ought to say, but he did not know what it was. He went out with her to the lift, and suddenly she turned to him

and laid a hand on the lapel of his coat, looking up at him, and there was something pitiful about her now. It was in her eyes, he thought, the look of defeat. . . . "Gil dear, I just wanna say, don't get all het up over this. We gotta reckon we're well rid of 'em—the dirty suckers!"

He couldn't let that pass. "Poppy—your ghastly expressions!"

"Well, what do you call them in your refined language? Oh, come off it, Gil," and he heard an agony of weariness in her husky voice. "You're not English any more than I am, thank God, and if you haven't had enough of this English gentility, I have!"

She pressed the lift bell violently. The ropes quivered in the cage. In a moment she would be gone, this destroyer of his world. Something had to be said. . . .

He forced himself to say it. "Poppy—the scandal—couldn't it all be settled somehow, out of court? All the slime and muck of the divorce courts—such an old family—and the two of us made to look fools. . . ."

He threw in that as an appeal to Poppy's vanity. He wasn't thinking of himself; he was thinking, "My beautiful Isabel. My wife. I was so proud of her. And now—this."

And it was not that the world before whom he had boasted of his possession of the Lady Isabel would smile derisively when it knew that she had betrayed him that mattered, not his being made to look a fool, but the frightful wreck of his dreams, the derision of the thought-demons in himself. . . . If only he could go on as before, seeing nothing, it might be possible to preserve the last tattered shred of illusion. . . .

Poppy flamed out at him. "Old family be damned! As for being made to look fools—haven't we been fooled for God and the divorce courts alone know how long?"

The electric lift came to a stop in front of them. He opened the gates for her and she stepped in.

"Let me know the result of the interview—simplifies things if you use my solicitors. Hayes and Wright. They've divorced all the best people. Cheerio." She pressed a button and sank out of his sight.

He turned and walked back into his office, and the enormous

oil-painting of Isabel on the wall opposite his desk stared at him. He sank down in his chair and stared at it, searching its painted beauty for the clue to the enigma of the sitter's personality. A little smile played about the lips. Was it of her lover she thought as she sat there being painted? Was it that which brought the little smile to her lips—such cold, unresponsive lips . . . were they warm under her lover's kisses? Did the hard eyes soften, the cold hands warm? How long had it all been going on? Ever since their marriage?

That abortion in Paris. . . . Following upon her visit to New York. It was because of Rex she had left him in Montreal and gone to New York. . . . Something in him recoiled in horror; his mind put up its utmost resistance, but something else in him persisted, relentlessly, until the thought became a conviction. . . . Destroying her lover's child, she had made herself barren to him for ever, murdered his unconceived sons. . . . With that thought it seemed to Gilbert Stroud that something in his brain exploded; he collapsed with his head on his desk, his arms flung out, the sweat bursting from his pores.

It was like a frightful dream from which he could not waken. If this thing were true, then any horrible, monstrous thing might be true; it might then be that there was a personal Deity who allowed the creatures of His creating to torment each other for His amusement. If this were true then it might equally be true that all the accumulated horror of the war was a mere cockfight for the satisfaction of some super-sadist.

But it couldn't be true, because there was a limit to what life could do to one, and because there had to be some modicum of sweetness left in life. . . . Something in him stood detached from his agony and suggested that he should go home and speak to Isabel—and then coldly she would deny the abominable, monstrous thing, and in the contempt of her eyes he would know that Poppy had lied or was labouring under one more of her sex-ridden illusions. Hadn't he always contended that Poppy's mind was a muck-pond?

He roused himself and rang for his secretary. Mechanically he instructed her to have the car sent round; to bring him what letters were ready for signature; dealt with the queries she had for him;

told her that he might not be back, but in the case of anything immediate she might telephone him at the house.

He went out and took himself down in the lift, stepped into the waiting car. "Home," he said.

Isabel would probably be out, he reflected, at her hair-dressers, or shopping. . . . "Curzon Street," his mind shouted, derisively, "that's where she'll be if she's not at home."

Still the sweat of agony poured from his pores. No, no, Isabel would be at home, writing letters in her boudoir, or giving a tea-party. He must keep that clearly in his mind. She would greet him coldly, contemptuously. It was what he wanted. Suddenly her coldness and contempt had become dear to him, for in the contempt of her eyes he would read that she had no lover; she would despise him that he could suspect her of anything so sordid, she the exquisite Lady Isabel, daughter of the tenth earl of Tringham. . . . The rarest orchid from the world's hot-house of orchid women, the star he had plucked out of the sky by the magnetism of his desire and cemented into his own life, like a jewel into a crown, with his pounds and dollars. . . . She towards whom his life had strained in a steadily mounting crescendo. . . .

2

The next few hours of Gilbert Stroud's life were lived at a velocity with which humanity cannot keep pace and survive. Yet each separate detail was sharply delineated; there were no blurred lines, no fusings of emotions or softenings of impressions. He was intensely aware of each detail of that home-coming, which incorporated an awareness of the sword-like shafts of sunlight that cut across the hall from the staircase window; the waxen quality of the purple and wine-coloured anemonies in the crystal bowl on the table; the curious spasm that contracted his butler's face when in reply to his inquiry he told him that her ladyship was lying down in her boudoir with a bad headache and had given orders that she was not to be disturbed.

He sped up the grey-carpeted stairs two at a time and knocked on the high-waisted green and gold enamelled door. Called imperatively, "Isabel!"

Her voice came faint through the door. "You can't come in."
"I must. Open the door."

There was no answer and he rattled the door-handle, anger mounting in him.

"Isabel! Do you hear? I want to speak to you—importantly. Open the door. Don't be absurd."

And then suddenly there was the sharp snap of the door being unlocked, and it was flung open—and Rex faced him.

His face was white and his eyes blazing. "I wanted to speak to Isabel importantly, too. Perhaps you wanted to discuss the same subject. Let's have it out! Is it this damned scandal Poppy is circulating?"

Gilbert saw over Rex's shoulder the slender figure of Isabel wrapped in a familiar *négligé* that was like twilight on a Venetian lagoon. She looked bored. The emerald on her finger caught the afternoon sunlight and became a great star of green fire.

He brought his gaze back to Rex's white face and defiant eyes, and said, "I wish to talk to my wife privately. I have nothing to discuss with you. Get out."

Rex flushed faintly and turned to Isabel. "Isabel—let's have this out now. It's got to be discussed."

"There isn't anything to discuss. Please go, Rex."

"If you want me to, of course." He turned to Gilbert again. "It's such damned lies all this scandal—monstrous. You don't believe it—you can't! I came to find out what Isabel proposed to do about it—I had to come secretly like this——"

He looked from one to the other, his face, usually so boyish, white and haggard. Isabel reached out a hand and thoughtfully rearranged a rose in the Lalique vase on her writing-desk. Gilbert took out his cigarette-case, extracted a cigarette, tapped it on the case.

"I have nothing to say to you, Merrill. I came to talk privately to my wife. I find you locked in here with her. Will you have the goodness to go? I have only a limited amount of patience."

Isabel said wearily, as though the argument bored her, "Oh, do go, Rex."

"All right—if you insist. You know where to find me when you want me. You've only to phone. But we ought to have the

filthy lie out now." He looked at Gilbert. "You're not going to let Poppy get away with this?"

Gilbert did not answer, and Rex crossed the room to Isabel and took her hands. "Good-bye, Isabel, you know I'll stand by you, whatever happens."

Gilbert, watching, saw her eyes soften. It was the first time he had ever seen her eyes like that. They were—starry. She said in a low voice, "Yes, Rex, I know that," and there was a curious vibration in that low voice, and an infinite tenderness.

Rex raised both the white slim hands to his lips. "Good-bye."

She looked down at his bowed head, the colour of her own, and her lips framed the word 'Good-bye.' For a moment when he looked up their eyes held each other—an almost imperceptible fraction of a second, but it did not escape Gilbert standing waiting by the open door, tapping his cigarette upon the gold case.

"Remember," Rex said as he passed him, "I wanted to stay and have this out—you sent me away."

Gilbert did not look up. He merely moved slightly so that the other might more easily pass, and the moment Rex had crossed the threshold he softly closed the door on him and turned the key in the lock.

He leaned against the door a moment, his eyes on Isabel.

He said, "Well?"

She sat down in a shell chair and proceeded to polish her nails.

"I thought there was nothing to discuss."

"With Rex, no. What Rex does, does not interest me. It is with you that I am concerned." He came over and stood before her. "Is Rex your lover?"

She laughed up into his face. "If he were, would I be likely to tell you? And if I said 'No,' would you be likely to believe me?"

"I should believe you—yes. I can't imagine you with a lover. I want to believe that it is all lies, Isabel, that it's only Poppy's foolish mind, and the fact that you and Rex have always been fond of each other. All this about the flat in Curzon Street—I don't know what Rex should want with a flat—to get away from Poppy occasionally, perhaps; he might have his reasons, and perhaps you did go there, but that doesn't mean anything nowadays, does it? Tell me there's nothing in all this ghastly business. To have you

—my wife—dragged through the muck of a divorce court—I can't bear it—we must convince Poppy that she's mistaken. . . .”

The sweat stood out on his forehead again now, and a nerve was twitching about his mouth, giving him a sense of gibbering when he spoke.

Isabel went on polishing her nails. “You will never convince Poppy that there was nothing between us, but her evidence will never convince a jury that there was! She won't get her divorce. That's where we win, Rex and I. You and Poppy thought you could buy us with your money, but you can't buy our secrets from us.”

“Isabel! For God's sake! What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? Just that this is where we get back on you for all we've suffered, enduring you both for the sake of your beastly money. All your lives you two will be haunted by the wonder as to whether we have been lovers. You'll never know, will you? And that is worse than knowing the worst. You come here and find Rex locked in with me—how can you know what passed between us?”

She leaned back, smiling at him, mocking him, all her contempt of him flaming in her eyes, the Merrill eyes, alternately fire and ice.

He leaned his head upon his arm outstretched along the mantelpiece. No, he would never know. She defeated him always and utterly. What went on inside her mind he would never know, nor the hidden life behind the cold mask of her eyes. But he had seen those eyes soften and her cold voice warm to tenderness, take on a low vibrating quality, so that one simple commonplace word had become upon her lips a crooning caress. . . . ‘Good-bye,’ she had whispered, and it was as though she said farewell to something beautiful and closed the door upon it, leaving something of herself outside—the self he would never possess. There was something in her that she kept locked away from him; he could not come with her into the secret land where she dwelled, though all night her cold body lay in his arms, she herself was not there. . . . Never for him had her eyes softened or her voice vibrated. . . . All his life had been a crescendo that culminated in her, strained towards that point at which he had held her in his arms in the illusion of possession, and waked to find he clasped a shadow. . . .

And slowly something mounted in him with this realisation, the accumulated resentment of the years. For two and a half years she had mocked at him and denied him, cheated him and defeated him, and now at last they faced each other openly, and either all his life he must go in an agony of defeat, tormented by uncertainties, or he must strip this woman's soul as naked as he had seen her body. And now there was that throbbing in his scar and racing of piston-rods in his head, that terrible tightness that made him feel as though he were nothing but a head, and his head a globe in which the whole of life whirled and plunged and revolved.

He straightened himself and snatched the nail-polisher out of her hands and tossed it on to the dressing-table.

"Now listen to me, Isabel. Before you leave this room you will swear the truth to me, once and for all. Was Rex your lover?"

She tilted her head back, smiling at him under half-closed eyes. "And if I said he was?"

Something told him that this was sadism of the subtlest and most exquisite variety.

He swooped down and caught her by the shoulders, dragging her to her feet, stood gripping her, forcing her to face him.

"Look here, Isabel, I've had enough of this." The veins were swelled on his forehead; there was that dreadful tightness and drumming in his head. "You'll drive me crazy, Isabel. Swear to me you've never had a lover, Rex or anyone else?"

"I thought you wanted the truth?"

"Isn't that the truth?"

She laughed, a curious, nervously excited laugh.

"You'll never know, will you?" she said, and threw back her head and laughed so that her white throat was strained and netted with its fine blue veins. "I'll swear anything you like, but all the same you'll never know, will you?"

And her laughter stung every quivering nerve in his body and a madness seized him, so that his hands flew to that strained throat to crush the tormenting laughter out of it, and a mighty orgasm seized him, so that madness mounted upon madness with a sense of triumphing will as the laughter choked away under his hands.

"Damn you! Damn you! Damn you!" he shouted, and a

very ecstasy of triumph seized him, so that now it was he who laughed, conscious of his power that had choked away that derisive laughter, conscious that his strength prevailed, so that the mocking eyes closed and the smile was twisted away. And now he was nothing but a will to destroy, and destroying, triumph. He shouted deliriously, "Now who wins? Now who wins?"

And then quite suddenly the wheels stopped their whirring in his head, and the piston-rods their plunging, and the tightness eased. It was as though something that had been toppling for a long while had crashed at last, and there was a stillness, and an overwhelming sense of destruction and disaster. The mighty orgasm was spent. His hands fell away and Isabel fell backwards into the chair. She lay there, her body strained back curiously over the lower serrations of the shell. He stood over her, swaying a little, exhausted, the sweat pouring down his face like tears. Mechanically he drew out his silk breast-pocket handkerchief and wiped his face. Isabel did not move. He watched the inflammation die away on her throat. Her eyes were open, staring, fixed in a stricture of horror. Her face looked curious. He bent over her.

Something that stood apart in him, afar off, told him that she was dead.

3

It seemed a long time to Gilbert Stroud that he stood there swaying, looking down at his dead. He had no emotion now save that of utter weariness, an exhaustion of body and soul. At the back of his mind flickered an odd dispassionate thought that it was curious how easily one could extinguish as vivid and vital a flame as a human life.

He was roused by a knock on the door. He called dully, "What is it?"

The butler's voice answered him. "Will you and her ladyship take tea, sir?"

He answered, "No. Nor dinner either. I'll ring if I want you."

"Should I send Holmes to her ladyship about six, sir, to help her dress? You will remember that there is a dinner-party arranged, sir."

"All right. I'll give you instructions about that later."

"Very good, sir."

He went over to Isabel and lifted her on to the bed. She lay there with that dreadful look on her face, like a bruised lily, he thought, and looked about for something to cover that outraged beauty. He pulled open a drawer and a silk handkerchief came to hand. He laid it over her face, and then sat down beside the bed and buried his face in his hands, his fingers pressed hard to his throbbing temples.

He sat there whilst the Spring sunlight receded and a soft grey-ness crept into the room, and in the grey-ness his thoughts flew about like a swarm of bats. When he moved, one of Isabel's hands flung out across the bed touched his cheek. He took it gently into his own and looked at it, the long, lily-like beauty of it; such a beautiful hand, exquisitely tapering fingers, exquisite shell-like nails, and the great emerald dark in the twilight. He laid his face against that cold hand—such cold hands always. Had they warmed under the pressure of a lover's hands? But that he would never know; she had defeated him after all, died with her secret. She was gone from him utterly now, all her coldness and her cruelty and her contempt, and those glimpses of tenderness. Gone into the limbo where Stem's vivid flame of a life had gone, and none knew where that was. . . .

So this was the end, then, of all his dreaming and desiring, of all his resentment and suffering and yearning; she was gone from him, and yet he was in utter possession. Perhaps he had scored off life after all. She had sought to keep her life away from him, hidden, but was not the triumph to him after all, in spite of the apparent defeat? For he had taken that life she sought to withhold from him and snuffed it out, as one might snuff out as little a thing as a candle's flame. She had defeated him, and yet with supreme paradox he had won after all. This was his hour of victory. . . . That was curious.

He rose and crossed the darkening room and looked out of the window. The square was misty with twilight, and lamps blossomed against the dark canopy of the trees. There were the cars parked, waiting to take people to dinners, theatres, dances, parties; there were the chauffeurs gossiping in groups, a postman crossing the road, an errand boy cycling. Life going on out there, as it would

go on when his life, too, was a flame snuffed out. That, too, struck him as curious. That one could count for so little. Could live and suffer so intensely, expend so much energy, and in the end matter so little. Already he did not belong any more to that life out there. He had taken life and therefore his own was forfeit. Yet if he went out there and walked in the square, and out into the lights and glamour of Piccadilly, no one would suspect that he did not belong. He was the supreme outcast—the man who has taken life. A murderer. There was a shudder in the word, but it left no stigmata by which the world might know that there went one who walked apart. Curious. And curious that no frenzy of horror or fear seized one. There was such a shudder in the word, and it was so terribly simple a thing after all; a paroxysm of rage, and then a weariness, and it was all over, and there was one life less in the world, and one had placed oneself beyond the world. One lived and yet was already virtually dead.

And now nothing could matter any more. The office could ring up and report any manner of financial disaster, and it would not matter; yet a few hours before the smallest detail awry would have matter intensely, and he would have fumed and raged and squandered his energy over trivialities tremendous in their power. But now he had passed beyond the trivialities. Nothing mattered any more, nothing, nothing, nothing.

Old forgotten far-off things came back to him. Quebec and the red-lamp houses and sinister narrow streets. Montreal and ski-ing and tobogganning down the Mount by the light of the great illuminated cross. M'Gill's, and caring passionately about democracy and Schopenhauer. The war, and lying beside the shell-hole debating whether he should blow out his brains or not. He had had the choice of life and death then, and he had chosen life—and with it Mary and Stem and Isabel. And this was the apex. Was it for this he had chosen life—that he might live and dream and hunger and suffer and take life, and thereby forfeit his own, reach that point where this time he had no choice but to die?

He thought of Stem dropping off into the darkness of a ship's hold—one let go one's hold on realities and dropped off into space. For him, too, there was nothing now but that letting go and dropping off into the Unknown. . . .

There was no horror in it. It was simply that one did not stay to be caught like a rat in a trap. One did not stay to be broken on the wheel of the criminal courts and led out in due course to a place of execution. One took one's own way out. It was part of what Stem would call 'the decency required.' And then, too, that way one saved Isabel's name. Rex would have to give evidence, but for his own sake he would keep Isabel's name out of it as far as possible, and with Isabel removed he did not think it likely that Poppy would renounce her chance of becoming Countess of Tringham. Curious thinking of oneself like this as already dead, as someone on whom shortly an inquest would be held. . . .

Curious that only Mary would grieve. To have spent so much emotion and leave behind only one mourner. He would like to go and say good-bye to Mary, but that would mean that she would be drawn into the sordid business. At least he might spare her that, he who had caused her so much suffering. Better to drop off quietly without farewells or explanations; go as Stem had gone. . . .

He turned away from the window and rang the bell. When the soft answering knock came on the door, he opened it and gave his butler his last instructions. "Sandford, I want you to telephone the police. Say that there has been a serious accident to her ladyship and that I instructed you to telephone them, and will they come at once."

For a moment the man stared, and he saw bewilderment change to a horror of comprehension in his staring eyes.

Gilbert went on, "When the police arrive you will say that I instructed you to show them upstairs, and you will bring them up here. You understand?"

The man's lips moved, but only shaped that last, "Very good, sir."

Gilbert closed the door and stood again beside the bed. He bent over the still, slender body and a great silent sobbing caught him, a shuddering agony that shook him to the bottom of his soul. He collapsed and lay with his arms flung out over the body. The scent of her *négligé* that was like Venetian moonlight crept out to him like a living thing.

He caught both the cold hands to his lips. She was all his now,

that cold woman in death no more unresponsive to his agony than she had been in life. This was the ironic apex of his so much desired possession.

And that was his last agonising thought of her, that at last he was in complete and utter possession. This was the pinnacle of the crescendo; all his life had been a gathering of forces sweeping upwards to this moment of ironic possession—a possession so absolute that having achieved it one could not go on living. . . .

He lay there clasping the cold hands until there was a sound of voices and a tread upon the stairs. They were coming for him; they did not know that already he had ceased to belong to their world. He sprang to his feet and snatched a red rose from the Lalique vase on the writing-desk and laid it between her breasts, as once he had done in life.

Then he crossed swiftly to the window and flung it open. It was quite dark outside now. As dark as the hold of a ship. The air was soft with Spring and held a faint fugitive scent of lilac. He paused a moment on the sill and looked down into the dark, and now another thought shuttle-cocked to and fro in his mind, a triumphant shout of a thought:

“Stem, Stem, I’m coming to you! Like this did you go, Stem, like this. . . .”

He let go the sill and dropped off into space.

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